

# FutureGenerations Graduate School

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## SEIZING THE MOMENT: A CASE STUDY ON CONFLICT AND PEACEMAKING IN SOMALILAND

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Rakiya Omaar

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## Glossary and Acronyms

APD	Academy for Peace and Development
HANGASH	Hay'adda Nabad Gal'yada Gaashaandhiga (Somali Military Intelligence Unit 1978 – 1991)
IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority on Development
MP	Member of Parliament
NDC	National Demobilization Commission
NEC	National Electoral Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSS	National Security Service
SNL	Somaliland National League
SNM	Somali National Movement
SOMRA	Somali Relief Agency
SOYAAL	SNM War Veterans Association
SSDF	Somali Salvation Democratic Front
SYL	Somali Youth League
UDUB	United Peoples' Democratic Party
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation for Somalia
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front
<i>Deydey</i>	Armed militiamen who preyed on civilians in the early 1990s
<i>Guurti</i>	Council of Elders
<i>Tabeleh</i>	Neighborhood committees formed in the 1980s with the specific purpose of reporting the activities of suspected anti-government families

## I. INTRODUCTION

Only a few readers will have heard of Somaliland, and even fewer will be familiar with its history. Most, if not all, will have heard of Somalia. Catapulted onto the world's headlines following the dramatic encounters with pirates off its coast, or because it is regarded as a sanctuary for Al Qaeda, Somalia has remained, for 18 years, one of the most intractable and deadly conflicts in the world. In November 2008, Time magazine's cover blared: "Somalia: the worst place on earth." Since then, an already complicated situation has become even more complex and dangerous and increasingly the violence is perceived as an international threat. However, stemming the violence in Somalia and preventing its spread requires, among other initiatives, acknowledging and engaging with the people of Somaliland.



Somalia is the most graphic illustration of the collapse and fragmentation of a state. Perhaps no other country combines, in such extreme form, an array of challenges, alongside the human consequences of brutal and prolonged wars that have killed and wounded tens of thousands. Somalis have been left disoriented and without a voice; the region is at loggerheads, and the world's diplomats are at a loss for workable solutions. Massive displacement of people has occurred within the country and beyond its borders, with opportunistic and extensive human trafficking as people take to the seas and resort to desperate measures in search of safety.

Since 1991, when the longtime dictator Mohamed Siad Barre was driven out of power, Somalia has been without an effective central government. The people have witnessed and endured war and fighting between warlords and their militia allies. They have lived through "solutions," "rebellions," and "occupations." They have seen a transitional federal government put in place by the international community; faced Islamic militants opposing foreign interference; lived through Ethiopian troops invading in January 2007, with aerial strike support from the US, in what was

described as pre-emptive action against threats by Islamists; seen the arrival of African Union troops, sent to back up and eventually replace the Ethiopian troops; hoped that the negotiated settlement that put a “moderate Islamic” government in place would be successful; and now seen the rise of the Shabaab, a radical and intolerant Islamic offshoot with a comprehensive and far-reaching social program.

By contrast, Somaliland, previously the northwest region of Somalia, has maintained relative stability through the last two decades. Although ineffective government and bloody factional fighting within the Somali National Movement (SNM) marked the first two years following its secession from Somalia in May 1991, the people of Somaliland took responsibility for their own peace and began building a new democracy. For answers and actions, they turned inward to their cultural practices of conciliation and to the wisdom and skills of clan elders. In 1993-1994, the elders led dispute mediation across communities and resolved conflicts within the SNM. Through systematic and exhaustive negotiations that began at the grassroots, they filled a political vacuum, brought the fighting to an end, and established a framework for a new state. Drawing upon the unity of purpose and tolerance of each other, which years of suffering in the 1980s had forged, and harnessing every possible resource, they crafted a strategy that made sense in the social, cultural, and historical framework of Somaliland. Today, the *Guurti*, or Council of Elders, serves as the upper chamber in Somaliland’s parliament.

Michael Walls (2009, p. 371), who has written extensively on the peace conferences of Somaliland, attributed their success to what he described as “a set of deeply embedded social norms.” These norms, he wrote, “emphasized the importance of dialogue between antagonists; a willingness to accept that the most complex grievances would be set aside indefinitely to avoid the contentious process of negotiating compensation payments; the opening of space for the intervention of mediators; and a sustained commitment to consensus building in preference to divisive voting.”

Somaliland’s peacebuilding process was punctuated by further serious internal conflicts in 1994-1995, which were finally put to rest in 1997. Despite the challenges and setbacks, the people of Somaliland remained committed to peacebuilding through dialogue and reconciliation. The Hargeisa-based Academy of Peace and Development has counted a total of 39 peace and reconciliation conferences between February 1990 and February 1997, “of which four were national in scope” (Walls, Ali, & Mohammed 2008, p. 26).

For the last nine years, political attention has concentrated on the establishment of a multi-party political system and elections, seen as a prerequisite towards modernization, democratization, and ties with the outside world. This process has been remarkably peaceful and resulted in a new Constitution with a multi-party democratic system of government, free and non-violent municipal elections, and a presidential election in 2003 that hung on a controversial recount of a mere 80 votes, and yet was accepted without incident in the interests of peace and security. In

September 2005, when parliamentary elections were contested under the glare of international observers who judged the elections as largely free and fair, armed militiamen, the ubiquitous symbol of the breakdown in law and order in the early 1990s, were nowhere to be seen.

Notwithstanding this positive overall trajectory, the statebuilding process has not been kind to the institution of the Guurti. Its widely honored contribution to peace in the 1980s and 1990s saw it enshrined as the “upper house” in the charters and constitutions that have guided Somaliland over the last two decades. Integration into the political structures of the state has been costly to the Guurti, and the elders more generally, in terms of its role in conflict management between state and society. Successive presidents bestowed material perks on the body and drew it into an ever-closer political alliance with the executive branch and ruling party. As it became part of a system of patronage, the Guurti’s time honored values and systems of succession that had ensured its social standing were eroded. A series of electoral crises in 2009 highlighted the public’s low esteem for the Guurti and the need for reform.

In the face of great difficulties and the absence of international recognition, the people of Somaliland persevere. Its story remains instructive on many levels for those interested in the promise and pitfalls of sustained peacebuilding from the bottom up.

## **II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOMALILAND**

Somaliland was a creation of the British Empire. After securing the sea route to India through the newly opened Suez Canal in the mid-19th century, the British occupied Aden, and then occupied the Somali coast opposite, primarily in order to protect the shipping lanes from piracy. For decades, Somaliland was administered from Bombay, and until Independence, Indians dominated the civil service.

A few years later, the colonial “scramble for Africa” ensued, and the British struck deals with the Italian, French, and Ethiopian governments to establish the boundaries of what was called the Somaliland Protectorate. The Somali-inhabited territories were divided into five. The French occupied the enclave of Djibouti. The Italians, latecomers to the rush to occupy Africa, took the southern littoral. Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia meanwhile laid claim to the interior portion of land, commonly known as the Ogaden, after the most prominent clan in the area. Lastly, the British in Kenya occupied the southern part of Somali-inhabited territory. The territorial boundaries were wholly arbitrary. In particular, the Somaliland-Ethiopia frontier cuts across the grazing lands of most of the Somaliland clans. The Second World War marked the opportunity for a new political dispensation. The British defeat of Italian forces in 1941 created a de facto British military protectorate over the entire region except Djibouti.

The political ferment of the 1940s, combined with the relatively light hand of the military administration, allowed Somali nationalist organizations to flourish. The most prominent of these was the Somali Youth League (SYL), founded in May 1943 in southern Somalia, but with branches in all Somali-inhabited territories. In British Somaliland, however, the dominant political force was the Somaliland National League (SNL), established at the same time. From 1950, the leader of the SNL was Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, who would later become Prime Minister of Somalia.

British Somaliland in the north became independent on 26 June 1960, and, in accordance with the timetable established a decade earlier, Italian Somaliland in the south followed six days later. In a wave of heady optimism, the north voted overwhelmingly to unite with the south. In an outpouring of emotion, public pressure compelled the legislative body of Somaliland to agree to the merger without any preconditions. It was hoped that this would be the first step to unification with the Somali areas of Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. Mogadishu in the south became the capital of the new unified Somalia.

During the early 1960s, Somalia was often portrayed as a model of liberal democracy in Africa. Elections were held with little or no fraud or intimidation, though with vast expenditures on campaigning. Governments changed twice in the decade through peaceful, constitutional means. However, a coalition of southern interests quickly came to dominate national politics, and although northern politicians were brought in as alliance partners in every government, the north became politically marginalized. In 1961, military officers in the former northern Protectorate, who objected to the transfer of all serious power to Mogadishu, attempted a coup to reverse the union. But they were thwarted. Thereafter, northern politicians sought more clout in Mogadishu. In 1967, Mohamed Ibrahim Egal was appointed Prime Minister. He did not, however, reverse the political-economic tide in favor of Mogadishu.

Nor did Egal slow down the decay of democracy. The potential economic fruits of independence were quickly obscured by the extensive factionalization of Somali politics, which became an arena of lavish patronage and rampant clannism. After the 1969 elections, all but one of the elected opposition MPs crossed the floor to join the ruling SYL party, hoping for ministerial posts that would help them repay the costs incurred in campaigning. Political energy was largely spent on negotiating over who was given what job, and who would join a coalition under what circumstances. This became particularly pronounced in Egal's second government, when the number of cabinet posts was dramatically expanded to make room for defectors from other parties. Disaffection with democratic politics was so widespread that when General Mohamed Siad Barre seized power in October 1969, there was little popular resistance. It seemed as though some political dynamism would be injected into Somalia. The first few years seemed to bear this out: the authoritarian and often brutal style of politics was seen as an acceptable price to pay for rapid progress in education and social welfare. Siad Barre's coup was also generally welcomed in the northwest, not least because it



represented a break with the former tight control of power by the southern elites.

The Ogaden War in 1977-78 was a turning point. The war, to “regain” the territories occupied by Ethiopia, was extremely popular throughout Somalia. Those in the northwest would have gained immediately from a Somali victory, as they were most closely integrated with the Ethiopian Ogaden, politically, socially and economically. But the intervention of the former USSR led to an Ethiopian victory. Barely a month after the withdrawal from Ethiopia, predominantly Majerteen army officers mounted a coup. This failed, leading to a merciless campaign of suppression against the Majerteen clan in the northeast.

The defeat also led to the flight of over 500,000 refugees to Somalia. Most of the refugees were former supporters of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), the guerrilla movement that had been at the forefront of the fight against Ethiopia in the 1960s and mid-1970s. Although the WSLF included members of all the thirteen main clans found in the territory, the majority were from the Ogaden clan. Bitter at what they saw as a betrayal, they presented a potential threat to Siad Barre. He bought their loyalty with promises of continued military struggle, and by offering them jobs, businesses, houses, and land. Most refugees fled to the northwest, and the promises could be kept only at the expense of dispossessing the locals—most of whom were Isaacs—who feared a demographic transformation in the northwest.

The unsuccessful coup of 1978 simultaneously led Siad Barre to concentrate his political support among his own Marehan clan, plus two other Darood clans, the Ogaden and Dulbahante. This trio of Darood clans were the new center of power. The Isaaq were among those excluded, which led to discontent and insurrection in the northwest, and the birth of the Somali National Movement (SNM).

### **III. Background to a Conflict and a War: 1982-1991**

The Somali National Movement was the vehicle for Somaliland nationalism. There are many ironies in this: the SNM never formally espoused separation for the northwest, and its leadership was either opposed to it or remained silent on the issue. After declaring independence in 1991, the SNM disintegrated. Meanwhile, clans and political forces that had been outside the SNM, and in some cases militarily opposed to it, became part of the polity of Somaliland, often enthusiastically so. This section details political change and social experience in northwest Somalia in the 1980s.

## **A. THE FORMATION OF THE SOMALI NATIONAL MOVEMENT**

By 1980, the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), dominated by Majerteen officers involved in the 1978 coup attempt, was the largest of the Somali opposition movements. But it had not seriously dented the might of Siad Barre's regime from its bases in the east of the Ogaden, despite aid from Ethiopia and Libya.

In the early 1980s, Isaaq clansmen in Ethiopia, some of whom were supporters of the SSDF, and a wide range of Isaaq intellectuals resident in Mogadishu, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and cities in Europe and America, independently began meeting to discuss the need for a separate armed movement to combat the government of Siad Barre. The formation of the Somali National Movement (SNM) was formally declared at a meeting held in London on 6 April 1981 that produced the outline of a political program. Meanwhile, on the ground in northwest Somalia, the first military officers to make up the armed wing of the SNM, had crossed the border into Ethiopia and presented themselves to the authorities, taking for their political policies the program laid down at the London meeting.

In 1982, three main SNM military bases were established inside Ethiopia, in the area just over the border with Somalia. Here, the growing number of northern civilian recruits and defectors from the Somali army, drawn almost exclusively from the Isaaq clan, were shaped into a guerrilla force with which to launch cross-border raids against Siad Barre's army. Military training provided with assistance from the Ethiopians, was supplemented with courses conducted by SNM political staff to produce a hard-core of disciplined fighters.

Over the following years, the SNM made numerous clandestine military sorties into northwest Somalia. Although these attacks were never a direct threat to the government's control of the area, the SNM's activities and the boldness and tenacity of its small force were a constant irritation to the Mogadishu government.

During this time, the organization functioned with limited military and financial support from outside. The Ethiopian government provided some money, training, a small supply of fuel, ammunition, small arms, and some money. The SNM relied heavily on the use of captured weapons and ammunition taken from the Somali army, and for money it turned to its own people for help. Clansmen from inside Somalia and from the Diaspora around the world subscribed to funding the SNM. This was one of the keys to its survival.

## **B. REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE IN NORTHWEST SOMALIA**

The creation and growth of the SNM was closely linked to developments inside northwest Somalia. From 1980 onwards, the Mogadishu government became increasingly repressive. The growing political tensions were exacerbated by what appeared to be a deliberate policy of underdevelopment. Already suffering from a massive brain drain of educated people and businessmen to Mogadishu, and later to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, the northwest was deprived of opportunities. Hampered by unfair economic practices and administrative dependence on services in Mogadishu,

it lacked the human and financial resources to improve public institutions. A key event was an initiative by a group of citizens in Hargeisa—doctors, teachers and businessmen—to form a self-help organization and rehabilitate the city’s main hospital. The group took the name Uffo, meaning “a breeze.” A sign that people had given up on the government, the creation of Uffo was to be a watershed in the political fortunes of the northwest.

Authorities saw Uffo’s activities as a declaration of war, an attempt to provoke a confrontation between the government and the people. In December 1981, while a few escaped in time, most members of Uffo were arrested. On 22 February 1982, they were brought before the military Security Court and sentenced to long terms in prison. The sentences triggered massive demonstrations in Hargeisa, the capital of the northwest, as well as other towns. The judgment provided the spark for bloody confrontations between students—armed with stones—and the security forces. The children attacked soldiers, government offices and vehicles, anything that had any connection with the government. The government responded by deploying heavy weapons, imposing a curfew, arresting “trouble-makers,” and closing the road from Djibouti, an economic lifeline for the region. The result was a further decline in living standards and more hardship. But the war of attrition continued. In subsequent years, commemoration of the anniversary, known as Dagahtuur, [‘The Stone-Throwing’] became the occasion for clashes between students and the police, army, and security services, leading to new arrests and detentions. The direct involvement of so many children inevitably drew parents into the conflict.

The defiant show of resistance in the northwest was met with further subjugation. An extraordinarily wide range of security institutions had been set up, in the early 1970s, to implement Siad Barre’s dictate. The Victory Pioneers, a paramilitary force that maintained surveillance on all neighborhoods, encouraged people to spy on their families, neighbors, colleagues, and classmates, and which had the authority to arrest and detain people suspected of anti-government sentiment, supplemented the all-pervasive National Security Service (NSS).

The National Committee for the Eradication of Corrupt Practices was originally formed to audit government finances. But it rapidly grew into a political weapon used to threaten or undermine the business interests of potential opponents, or just commercial competitors of businesses owned by people in government. A new military police organization, known as HANGASH, was established after the 1978 coup attempt. It came to be feared even more than the NSS, and was at the centre of the coercive measures enforced in the northwest.

Surveillance was extended deep into the community. Neighborhoods were divided into units of forty houses known as *tabelehs*. A house that enjoyed the government’s political confidence was put in charge of monitoring the movement of the other houses—their own comings and goings and their visitors. The *tabeleh* system, intended to keep track of the families whose men left to join the SNM, was intrusive in the extreme and created suspicion and mistrust. They had the power to enter homes at will, and to ask detailed questions about the whereabouts of occupants, the identity of

visitors, and the purpose of their visit. Children were a primary target for interrogations. Women whose husbands, sons or fathers died were unable to mourn them in public, for fear of being branded as “enemies” to be watched over.

Competing with each other, the various arms of the regime—the official women’s organization, the Party, the HANGASH, the NSS, as well as the *tabeleh* system, deprived people of their privacy. Compulsory attendance at numerous government rallies and meetings was a strategy to keep residents occupied and under surveillance. The multiple visits and questions about the failure to attend these public events heightened awareness about the extent to which people’s lives were monitored. The level of cruelty inflicted was exceptional, and people were seared by their experiences of these years.<sup>1</sup>

Whenever the SNM attacked, there were new waves of detentions and the curfew became longer. In 1985, following the assassination of the regional head of the NSS, the curfew came into effect at 4:00 p.m. The early curfew created particular difficulties for traders, as well as consumers. Food, charcoal, and other essential goods were normally brought into the main towns from the surrounding countryside for sale the following day. However, the early curfew made it impossible to meet the deadline. Checkpoints were set up everywhere, making it hazardous to travel to other towns, and making normal economic activity more difficult. Under the pretext of searching for SNM fighters, soldiers raided homes in the middle of the night, using the opportunity to loot gold, money, and other belongings. Zamzam Abdi Aden (interview, undated), then a civil servant in Hargeisa, summarized the cumulative impact of these policies and practices.

*The government knew that people hated the regime more and more. And people knew that the government had the power to make their life miserable. For example, in 1985 the government forbade people from building houses. The authorities came up with a lot of new and extraordinary regulations that baffled people. But what could people do? Who could they complain to? There was no television or international telephone lines. It just became a matter of the people and the government hunting each other.*

The consequence of the crackdown was a dramatic increase in support of the SNM. A substantial number of men—soldiers, students, traders, and civil servants—joined the exodus to SNM bases in Ethiopia.

Mustapha Haji Nuur (interview, undated), who was one of the many young students who made the trek to Ethiopia, recalled:

*I joined the SNM when I was 17. I did so because I was fed up with the oppressive conditions under which we were living, of being bullied and*

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<sup>1</sup> For additional background information about the policies and practices of the Siad Barre regime in the northwest in the 1980s, see Africa Watch (January 1990).

*pushed around by people who worked for the government. Imagine a curfew that began at 3:00 p.m.*

### **C. CROSSING THE RUBICON: THE 1988 WAR**

In March 1988, events in Ethiopia led the SNM to a dramatic escalation of the war. President Mengistu suffered a disastrous military defeat in Eritrea. In order to shore up his northern front, he needed to redeploy forces stationed near the Somali border, and rushed to sign a peace treaty with Siad Barre in April, formally bringing the 1977-78 war to a close, a full decade after regular hostilities had actually come to an end. Part of the agreement (never properly honored by either side) was that each country would no longer sponsor opposition movements fighting the other. The Ethiopian army commander in Harrar was instructed to cease support for the SNM.

This created a crisis for the SNM. Progress in the war had been laboriously slow and morale amongst forces at the front was low. They were short of ammunition and fuel. Some among the political leadership argued that the movement should withdraw its forces from the border area to camps hidden inside Ethiopia, regroup for some months, and then emerge to resume the fight at a later date. The military officers on the ground disagreed strongly. They recognized the widespread disillusionment that a withdrawal would create among the forces and the impossibility of holding their men together for such an extended period away from the front. Against the wishes of some of their own leaders, and without the knowledge of the Ethiopians, the SNM forces embarked on a massive simultaneous attack on Hargeisa and another main town in the northwest, Burao.

The attacks were launched in the closing days of May 1988. The SNM forces numbered around three thousand men in total, the majority trained, disciplined, and battle hardened. Their sense of purpose, however, could not compensate for the inadequacy of their equipment and lack of ammunition. They calculated on the collaboration of their clansmen once they entered the towns, and on capturing equipment during the fighting.

Although the simultaneous assaults on Burao and Hargeisa did not coincide as intended, the SNM initially achieved remarkable gains against the much larger and better-equipped government army. The sheer ferocity of the SNM's fighters drove the army back to the garrisons within Burao and Hargeisa, leaving many of the suburbs in the hands of the SNM. The government army relied heavily on its vast arsenals of artillery, multiple rocket launchers, tanks, and fighting vehicles mounted with heavy machine guns to blitz the areas in which the lightly armed SNM moved nimbly on foot. Aircraft flown by mercenaries flew repeated sorties over the towns and surrounding areas. Hargeisa in particular was subjected to dawn-to-dusk bombing and rocket attacks by aircraft flown from the city's airport.

For many weeks the situation remained the same, with neither side making significant gains whilst the two towns were rapidly reduced to rubble by the army's bombardment. Loss of life was enormous. Sealed from the outside world by strict security and censorship, the slaughter continued unabated and unchallenged. By August, the SNM's ranks had been severely depleted. The majority of their original seasoned fighters and

many of their best officers had been killed, replaced by enthusiastic but inexperienced civilians. Short of fuel and ammunition, the SNM began a retreat after three months.

#### **D. FLIGHT AND EXILE**

As the SNM retreated, it was preceded by an exodus of almost the entire urban civilian population of the northwest. The cities of Hargeisa and Burao were depopulated, and government policy thereafter was to render much of the rural areas uninhabitable, using land mines (Africa Watch et al. 1993). About 400,000 people fled to Ethiopia and many others went to the Arab countries and Europe.

Meanwhile, back in the ruins of the towns abandoned in the fighting, the government army and its followers set about the systematic destruction and looting of any remaining assets that had survived the bombardment. Windows, doors, iron roofing sheets, timber, plumbing and wiring, and fixtures as small as hinges and screws were removed to be sold in neighboring countries. Anything of value that could not be taken was simply vandalized and the empty shells of buildings scattered with anti-personnel mines to further discourage the owners from returning.

#### **E. A NECESSITY OF WAR: ELDERS AS A POLITICAL INSTITUTION COME INTO THEIR OWN**

The need for fighters, food, fuel, ammunition and transport, and the sudden and unplanned arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees, who had deserted their homes in haste, presented the SNM with a daunting task. This, coupled with the cessation of military and financial aid from Ethiopia, forced the SNM to turn to the elders among the refugee population for help on many fronts. The only structure the elders could use, because it was the only one they were familiar with, was the clan system. Their ability to help in settling conflicts within the SNM itself, in mobilizing their communities, and in assuming a more overtly political character laid the foundations for the role they would play in the 1990s.

Instead of dealing with the elders in an informal or ad hoc manner, the SNM designed a formal arrangement for them, which would come to be known as the Guurti, or the Council of Elders. Such a system had not previously existed in the political history of Somaliland, although groups of elders, known as Guurti, had traditionally been involved in brokering disputes within clans and between different clans.

Mohamed Hashi Elmi (interview, undated) one of the founders of the SNM, spoke about their new responsibilities.

*At a meeting in Aderoush, we asked the elders to help the SNM and to bring an end to various conflicts within the SNM. They were more knowledgeable about customary law and clan traditions than we were. They used this expertise to fundraise for the SNM, to recruit fighters, and to provide us with food rations and livestock for meat. We created an executive body for the elders and a secretary to record decisions. They were a great asset when it came to conflict resolution.*

The Guurti is now the upper chamber in Somaliland's parliament and Haji Abdi Hussein Yusuf, popularly known as Abdi Warabe, is the head of the Guurti. He is one of the best known elders who has been at the center of peacemaking in Somaliland for many years. From the very beginning, Abdi Warabee said (interview, undated), he and his colleagues had a broad vision of their role.

*Five hundred men, representing all the Isaaq clans of Somaliland, took part in the first Guurti meeting in Aderoush where we laid the groundwork for the formation of the Guurti. It was there that we began our work on how to live peacefully alongside those clans that had been on the side of the regime.*

They lost no time, he added, in getting down to the job that was expected of them.

*We immediately informed all the young strong men that they were required to take up arms and fight alongside the SNM movement. We gave instructions to all the refugees that they must donate a portion of their food rations to the SNM to feed the fighters.*

The SNM's 6<sup>th</sup> congress of 1989 in Baligubedley agreed that the Guurti would be formally recognized in the constitution of the SNM as a governing body. In addition to pulling together material assistance for the SNM, and tackling internal disagreements, the elders, as Haji Warabe pointed out, also came to the aid of the SNM in reaching out to the northern clans associated with the Siad Barre regime—the Dulbahante, Warsengeli, and Gadabuursi—in an effort to encourage reconciliation.

Sheikh Nuur (interview, undated), who was active then and is now in the Guurti, paid tribute to the role of women in those early days and acknowledged the importance of their assistance to the Guurti.

*Women were active at every stage of the campaign for peace. Peace in Somaliland would not have been possible without them. When the Guurti was being established, women were the first to agree to the traditional rule and to give us their trust and backing. And when we were refugees, they were our strongest supporters. They gave us, and the SNM, far more of their food rations than we had asked for.*

In 1989-90, the Somali government was facing serious and sustained armed opposition from movements in the south. In 1990, as the government's hold on the country became increasingly precarious, the SNM, alongside the Guurti, sought to bring to an end hostilities between the Isaaq clans, on the one hand, and the clans of the Dulbahante, Warsengeli, and Gadabuursi on the other hand.

In January 1991, Siad Barre and his government were forced out of the capital, Mogadishu, and eventually out of the country.

## **IV. Enemies' Reconciliation and The Brothers' War: Secession and After, 1991-92**

After nine years of struggle, victory came almost unexpectedly to the SNM. Suddenly it was faced with an array of challenges that would have been monumental for the best prepared and best organized movement. Hargeisa was in ruins; with scarcely a house intact, it became known as "a roofless town." Even the main streets were mined. Economic activity had come to a standstill, and the population was scattered. Politically, differences between the SNM and the movements in the south were deepening, and there was still, despite the talks that had begun, a huge gulf between the almost wholly Isaaq SNM and some of the other clans in the northwest, which had sided with Siad Barre.

### **A. EUPHORIA IN A DESTROYED LAND**

Within days of its military victory, the SNM took far-reaching steps to reconcile with its former opponents, including those who had fought alongside the forces of Siad Barre. The rapidity and comprehensiveness of this reconciliation meant there were few significant military conflicts between Isaaq and non-Isaaq clans in Somaliland. It stands as one of the most notable achievements of the SNM in the early days following its victory.

Reconciliation was helped by the military supremacy of the SNM. The SNM was unquestionably victorious, and no administration could be formed without recognizing that SNM members should take the leading positions. In clan terms, the numerical predominance of the Isaaq and their control of the key towns, especially Hargeisa, and Berbera, the economic nerve centre of the region, had similar consequences. The delicate balance of power was within the Isaaq, and maintaining it was yet to be a major challenge for sustaining peace. The unity of the northwest was also assisted by the virtually unanimous opposition to the self-declared interim government of Ali Mahdi Mohamed, announced in Mogadishu at the end of January 1991, taken without consultations with the SNM or taking heed of developments in the northwest. It confirmed a common fear that the region would, once again, be left without a political say in a unified Somalia.

In one of his early speeches, Ali Mahdi Mohamed described the armed struggle, which began in the central regions of Somalia, as the primary catalyst for the overthrow of the Said Barre regime, completely ignoring the contribution of the SNM, which had preceded the war in the south by nearly a decade. The speech, which was broadcast by the BBC Somali Service, profoundly angered politicians as well as civilians in the northwest. It enormously strengthened the hand of those advocating separation.



## **B. PEACE BUILDING**

Soon after the collapse of the state, adjacent clans started cessation of hostilities and grassroots conflict resolution conferences, which resulted in confidence building. These conferences dealt with all sorts of issues all that could be settled, be it death, looting, grazing land/watering wells, confiscation, and other local issues. These measures were instrumental in building trust and healing divides, and paved the way for further meetings and conferences. These initiatives began in the eastern regions of Somaliland, then other regions at the center and west followed suit.

From 15-27 February 1991, a meeting was held in Berbera between the SNM and Isaaq elders, on the one hand, and representatives of the Sool, Sanaag, and Awdal regions in northwest Somalia, where the clans of the Dulbahante, Warsengeli, and Gadabuursi lived, to debate a ceasefire and relations between all groups in the region. It was agreed that a provisional administration should be formed in the British Somaliland territories in order to restore order and promote the cohesiveness of the northern communities. Furthermore, it was proposed that the 1960 Act of Union should be reviewed and revised so that if and when the south became stable and had an administration of its own, then the northern administration would consider negotiating with them on the subject of national unity. It was also agreed to reconvene in Burao in April, giving participants time to canvass their own constituencies. In April, for example, leading members of the Gadabuursi clan, convened a seven-day conference to examine their clan's position on the issue of an independent Somaliland, and to exchange views on the war in Berbera. Intellectuals and elders of the clan from all over the world were summoned to attend. By the end of the session, they had concluded unanimously that they were in favor of an independent Somaliland and would strive for peace and reconciliation in its borders.

The Burao meeting was duly convened from 27 April to 4 June 1991 by the SNM and the elders for all the clans of Somaliland to discuss reconciliation and future governance, where it was confirmed that no revenge attacks or action would be taken against the clans that had opposed the SNM. This conference marked a positive step for it helped to minimize fear and enmity on a national scale. The numerous small-scale gatherings, which had already taken place between the clans, had also defused tensions. To advance the tentative moves, which had been made to reconcile clans in the eastern region of Sanaag, a committee comprising all the clans of Somaliland was formed in Burao and sent to Sanaag.

But the significance of Burao, which overshadows all other outcomes, was the declaration, on 18 May 1991, that the northwest had taken itself out of the 1960 union with Somalia and would henceforth be a sovereign nation. Political momentum was in fact dictated by public pressure. For the first half of the meeting, elders who, reflecting the views of a large swathe of civilians, deliberated and recommended separation from the south to the central committee of the SNM, which had never advocated secession. A series of political announcements in Mogadishu were seen as blunders, as far as the northwest was concerned. By reinforcing the impression that the northwest would remain a junior partner, on whose behalf decisions would be made, these unilateral

actions hardened attitudes. On 18 May 1991, the chairman of the SNM, Abdirahman Ahmed Ali, known as Abdirahman Tuur, was forced by overwhelming public acclaim to declare the formation of the independent Republic of Somaliland in Burao.

When British Somaliland voted for union in 1960, the rights of the citizens of what became the northwest were supposed to be guaranteed by an act of union. However, no such act was ever passed by the unified national Somali parliament, so that the unification was never formally ratified. Subsequently, Somaliland nationalists have based their legal arguments for the independence of Somaliland on the absence of any legal dissolution of the independent status of former British Somaliland, even though for the first two decades of independence, there was little serious consideration of reversing the union.

The chair of the SNM, Abdirahman Tuur, and an administration of his choice, were given two years to steer the country as a transitional government.

### **C. SURVIVAL AMID THE RUINS**

The revival of Somaliland in the early 1990s was due entirely to the efforts of its people. Nowhere was this truer than in the economic field. Although large sections of the population had to work hard to earn a meager living for themselves and their families, some sectors of the economy recovered with astonishing speed, against formidable odds. This was especially true of livestock, the main pillar of Somaliland's economy. From the beginning of 1991, herders benefited from the absence of countrywide conflict and of the opening of the border with Ethiopia. Those who had a nucleus of animals intact after the war could begin to rebuild their way of life. Animal exports rose dramatically, showing the ability on the part of merchants to operate in extremely unfavorable circumstances, including the lack of banks, telephones, health certification for livestock, and insurance facilities. The other principal mainstay of the economy was remittances, which enabled thousands of individuals and families to make ends meet and plan for the future.

In the first few months after peace was re-established, business began to resume. The main activities were importing, building materials and basic consumer goods, especially sugar, flour and cooking oil, and exporting livestock. The port of Berbera was working well and the traffic enabled small hotels in Hargeisa and Berbera to function to full capacity.

Rebuilding the country, including public institutions, was regarded as a collective responsibility, as is evident in the manner in which the police force, made up of former police officers and the leaders and fighters of the SNM, was set up. Hassan Ahmed Adan, head of the Somaliland Association of Lawyers, helped to set up the police force there and noted (interview in Hargeisa 2006):

*I arrived in Somaliland at the beginning of 1992 amidst total devastation. I was asked by the mayor at the time, Omer Bobeh, to establish a rudimentary police force operating out of what is now the central police station. We had nothing—no transport, no equipment, no electricity, nothing with which to build anything. The station, occupied by militiamen, was filthy. We couldn't have worked without*

*Soyaal, the veterans' association. We picked 350 of their best people and trained them as best as we could, under the circumstances. They didn't get a salary, but we were able to give them lunch, which was a big help given the economic situation at the time. I was also helped by one of the local NGOs, SORAA, which made copies of the documents we were using as teaching tools.*

The commitment and enthusiasm of the public, he said, made up for the material deficiencies.

*Though we didn't have money and material resources, there was a strong spirit of self-help in the community and so we got a lot of public support, morally and in practical contributions. I also got a lot of assistance from businessmen; for example the first generators, brought over from Djibouti, were given to us. People saw the existence of a police force, however basic, as a priority. These 350 former fighters formed the backbone of the Somaliland police force, and got us through the Borama conference in 1993 [see below].*

But the efforts of the public were not matched by those of the SNM or the government, with tragic consequences.

#### **D. THE SNM AND THE GOVERNMENT: CREATING A DANGEROUS VACUUM**

The new administration established in Burao in May 1991 faced an unenviable task. What baffled the returning refugees was how little the administration tried to improve the situation. The lack of any governmental efforts to rebuild the infrastructure of economic services and to provide incentives to business held back the economic recovery in 1991-92. On the contrary, by doing little or nothing to boost the economy, for example by ignoring the nonexistence of banking or credit facilities, the lack of communications, and the absence of a functioning legal system, the government merely created difficulties.

Djibouti reaped the benefits of Somaliland's economic disarray, attracting the export trade from eastern Ethiopia and the import trade from overseas. Some businessmen took advantage of visiting relatives in refugee camps in Ethiopia to make business calls abroad. Others were forced to travel to Djibouti in order to make financial arrangements, obtain legal certificates, or use the telephone and fax. There were simply no governmental policies on the economic front. Nor was there an investment in reconstructing schools or hospitals. The failure to establish law and order was the most serious lapse, particularly given the easy availability of deadly weapons, which allowed minor incidents to escalate out of control.

Speaking in June 1992 in his home in Hargeisa, Yusuf Abdi Gabobe, then the chairman of SOYAAL, the veterans' association, expressed the sense of bewilderment many fighters and returned refugees felt at the time, at what had become of the SNM, and at the government's inertia.

*After the declaration of independence, the government did not take off and the importance of the SNM as an organization diminished. Before, people saw the SNM as an authority. It has little of that left now. But it has not been replaced by*

*another system of authority. The SNM was swallowed by the system it created, resulting in the existing dangerous vacuum.*

*The SNM should have been revived to help the country through its difficulties. They have delayed and delayed the meeting of the central committee, and have not called the elders together. The SNM liberated the country. It has a duty towards this country which it has not fulfilled. It has been reduced to warring factions. But the general public does not want to recognize this reality. Psychologically, people are still relying on an SNM that no longer exists as an organization. They do not appreciate the depth of the political void created by the paralysis within the SNM. Nor has the SNM told the people that it was dissolving itself. That at least would have been a clear statement that would force them to look for other forms of organization. The government does not want a meeting of the elders either; they are afraid of condemnation and of change.*

Political Islamists exploited the absence of governmental authority. Militant Islam benefited from the fact that during Siad Barre's rule, religion became the most potent form of defying what was seen as the regime's godless ideology of scientific socialism. Others had drifted towards religious extremism in the camps.

Meanwhile, the one force that could have begun to rebuild the country, the SNM itself, allowed itself to disintegrate. The SNM never held a congress to authorize its non-existence, an oversight that was later to haunt Somaliland, as detailed below. Its component parts went their separate ways. Many of the veterans of pre-1988 days simply abandoned their units, believing they had accomplished their goal and could take a well-earned rest. Those who had joined more recently, or even taken up arms after the fall of Siad Barre, reverted to other forms of military organization: as clan militias or predatory bandits, known as *deydey*.<sup>2</sup>

## **E. THE DREAM TURNS SOUR: OUTBREAK OF CONFLICT IN BURAO AND BERBERA**

Through exhaustion and goodwill, peace reigned during 1991. But the political fissures inherited from the SNM, combined with the failings of the leadership, led to disastrous fragmentation and conflict. For most citizens of the new republic, it was simply inconceivable that former SNM Mujahidin, as the fighters were known, would turn their guns on each other, and on civilians. But less than a year after the mass return to Somaliland, this happened in Burao. The huge numbers of unemployed young men, who had known only war, exile and instability, and who had ready access to weapons, were a force waiting to be unleashed.

Mustafa Haji Nuur (interview, undated), the young student who went to train for military service with the SNM at the age of 17, spoke of living like "outlaws" when they had finally gained the fruits of their labor.

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<sup>2</sup> The word "deydey" has its roots in the word to "hunt" and implies looking for something to loot.

*After the war we became a militia, but many SNM did not. They remained peaceful and were appalled by our actions. This caused a serious rift between former comrades as we were now on opposite sides. We had no objective or ideology. We were frustrated and had no sense of direction. We had nowhere to go, no settled place to call home. We were disappointed at the way the country had turned out, so we refused to surrender our arms. Instead, we used them for negative ends. We were lawless, looting and robbing trucks, which were carrying food aid. We did what we wanted. We felt lost, out of touch with the ideals that made us join the SNM in the first place. And we were looked upon as bandits, which is what we were. Because of our behavior, we were ostracized from society. As a result, we were constantly in a state of antagonism towards everyone and everything.*

The SNM, he argued, offered “weak leadership” at a time of crisis.

For about two months, tension had been rising between the Habr Yoonis and Habr Jelo militias in Burao, both Isaaq clans. Various explanations have been put forward. Many civilians accuse the fighters, particularly the leaders of the different military factions, of settling old political and personal scores, with underlying tensions going back to enmities while in exile in Ethiopia. In late 1991, there was much rumor and misinformation on both sides, with each side accusing the other of planning to take control of the town.

On 10 January 1992, the violence exploded. There were demonstrations by civilians on the two sides, protesting against the prospect of war. Both militias fired into the civilians. Serious fighting began on 12 January, continuing up to the 17<sup>th</sup>. Tanks were used and artillery shelling was intense. The outpatient department and the maternity wing of the hospital were completely destroyed. Many houses were hit and collapsed or were partially destroyed. The hospital and the warehouse of the International Committee of the Red Cross were looted of food and drugs. Civilians fled in all directions, leaving the two factions to face each other. Some civilians returned to Ethiopia.

The late Sheikh Ibrahim Sheikh Madar was head of the Guurti at the time. In an interview in July 1992 in Hargeisa, he underlined their efforts to contain the fighting in Burao.

*We went to Burao before the war started. We stayed for a month and four days. The government knew this, but nobody asked us anything. We went there again, in the midst of the fighting. On our second visit, we stopped the firing. We stayed for a month.*

Sheikh Madar and his colleagues from Hargeisa were joined by delegations of elders from the Dulbahante and from the Gadabuursi, underlining the urgency and scale of the perceived threat to Somaliland as a whole. Yassin Gallia Khahin, one of the elders who traveled from Borama to Burao as part of the Gadabuursi delegation, explained why they felt compelled to make the journey and the effort.

*The Gadabuursi did not want to be remembered in history as the people who stood by and watched their brothers in Burao destroying each other. Secondly, we*

*understood that if a clan war erupts, everyone is vulnerable, especially we as a minority who had not been on the side of the SNM. Hostilities and resentments, which you think have long been buried, can come out of nowhere and then suddenly you are a target. So we did not want to see clan wars in Somaliland. And we wanted to make up for past mistakes and do what we could. We just could not stand there and do nothing.*

Nuur Dualeh Diriye, working as a journalist in Burao, spoke of the helplessness of civilians.

*Civilians wanted peace but they didn't know which road to take. People started drifting back to Burao around March 1992. They saw the politicians and the opposition, who were arguing in Hargeisa, as only interested in power and blamed them for fuelling communal tensions. They asked why nothing was being done to back up the efforts of the elders.*

Saying “elders cannot manage the job by themselves,” he highlighted the constraints under which they were working.

*Politicians can undo the achievements of elders through money, misuse of information and influence on the rest of the community.*

Although the actual fighting in Burao lasted less than a week, it came as a major psychological shock to Somaliland, all the worse in its impact because hopes had been so high.

The fighting that followed in Berbera in March, involving the Esa Muse and Habr Yoonis clans, was even more disastrous because Berbera is the economic hub of Somaliland. The country depends upon livestock exports, almost all of which pass through the port. By April-May 1992, general insecurity and banditry was affecting much of rural Somaliland, especially in the vicinity of the conflict areas.

The complexity of many of the conflicts in Somaliland at the time, where grievances along clan lines were deeply and intimately intertwined with a battle for political power, personal rivalries among SNM military commanders and political leaders and competition for scarce resources was captured by the Academy for Peace and Development in an insightful analysis of what happened in Berbera in 1992.

*“...the conflict was essentially about the control of resources and revenue streams that were important to Somaliland as a political entity, as well as a struggle between those who wanted to remove the President from office and those who wanted him to remain. In other words, it was a political conflict in which the government found themselves in a position where they felt they had to face down an opponent who was undermining their position and capacity to govern. On another level again, the conflict had its roots within the SNM, rather than between the clans themselves. During the conflict with Siad Barre, he had represented a potent common enemy, and once he was gone, and well-armed militia suddenly found themselves with nothing to retain their focus, internal divisions quickly came to the surface. Sometimes these occurred along clan lines, but not always. As the Berbera conflict evolved, the sense that it was an Esa Musa/Habar Yoonis affair grew stronger, and during the mediation process, the clan structures were*

*the ones most useful in reaching agreement. In many ways, though, it would be a mistake to view the conflict itself as being fundamentally clan-based: clan was one amongst several factors, and arguably played a greater role in resolving the situation than in creating it...*" (Walls, Ali, & Mohammed 2008, p. 47)

The livestock export economy was profoundly vulnerable to stresses caused by war. Between February and June 1992, the trade through Berbera came almost to a complete halt. Business confidence in Somaliland was shattered and a number of traders were bankrupted.

The situation called for urgent and thoughtful intervention, not only to solve the immediate crisis, but also to develop policies and put in place structures and institutions that could protect Somaliland from self-destruction.

## **V. A PYRAMID OF PEACE: PEACE-MAKING FROM BELOW, 1992-93**

The government took no action to prevent the Burao and Berbera wars, and seemed to be helpless as Somaliland threatened to slide towards wholesale civil war, as had happened in the south. Early on, however, clan elders began to take a grip on events. Their first interventions in both Burao and Berbera had come to nothing, but as it was clear that the government was incapable of solving the problem, the elders took on the mission themselves. This began one of the most remarkable political processes, which in less than a year was to lead to a complete, non-violent change in government and the establishment of nationwide peace, with the beginnings of the creation of a structure to enforce it.

### **A. A FORMIDABLE COMBINATION: THE ELDERS AND CITIZENS MOBILIZE EACH OTHER**

The role of the elders in Somaliland has received much praise but is not well understood. Who are the elders and why did their efforts meet with success? The answer, according to many other elders who were at the forefront, lies in this Somali proverb: "A wise man can fail in his leadership without the backing of his people, but an ignorant man can become a successful leader with the support of his people." The elders succeeded because they were responding to a call for action from their own communities and because the trust placed in them made those same communities their partners in the search for lasting peace.

"The movement to secure peace," commented Zamzam Abdi Aden "was born out of raw desperation, a deeply felt need to end the cycle of violence." She had returned from exile in the UK in May 1991 and was employed as a relief worker for the Somali Relief Agency (SOMRA), which became active in both Burao and Berbera. Robbed on many occasions of the medical supplies intended for the sick and wounded, people had

nothing left to lose, she argued, and peace was not an option but rather a matter of life and death.

*People were living under extreme conditions. Morale was very low. Everyone felt lost. No one was safe or immune.*

*The fighters who had secured our freedom suddenly became our adversaries. We did not expect our liberators to become our enemies. The mandate of the SNM was to overthrow an oppressive regime. What they did not have was a concrete plan of what they were going to do once the war was over. The movement, which had once been so strong and united, began to crumble shockingly fast, forming splinter groups. Some renegade groups looted, taking what little resources people had. They themselves were lost and the result was deep and misdirected rage. The liberators turned into looters and bandits. It was truly terrible.*

Women, she said, were prepared to go to extraordinary lengths, and to assume new and untested responsibilities, for their own sakes and that of their families.

*The drive for peace in Somaliland came from within. Women who were tired of fleeing the homes they had just re-built lobbied their husbands, fathers, sons and uncles, and urged them to find a solution to the chaos. Women talked together and agreed to seek remedies, to mobilize their menfolk and send them around the country as peace envoys. They committed themselves to becoming their families' sole breadwinners, whilst the men were away. Women went to work selling milk, meat, or vegetables at the market. They did anything and everything to obtain an income and keep the menfolk on peace missions. In return, they asked respected clan elders to force the militias within their clans to put down their weapons and work for peace.*

Although barred from taking a direct part in the talks, they did what they could, Zamzam commented, to emphasize the premium they placed on a positive outcome.

*At the peace conferences, women furnished the venues and made refreshments and food available. When the men became antagonistic and tried to leave the conference, women surrounded the building and refused to let them leave until they had come up with concrete solutions and agreements. They boosted morale with songs full of hope and aspirations, as well as poems about their desperation.*

Everyone had a part to play in the peace movement, and there was a wide range of actors and contributors, she pointed out.

*The peace movement was not something developed by the elite in society; everyone was involved. NGOs, like SOMRA, provided medical equipments, tents etc. A committee of health care professionals and non-professionals came together to rebuild the main hospital in Hargeisa and to provide health care. Clan elders persuaded the militias to put away their arms. They also rallied rural citizens to provide food from their farms and livestock to feed the participants at the various conferences. The militia who were ready to disarm received police training from the older experienced police officers. Women agreed to look after the family whilst the men negotiated peace. They also cleaned up the towns of debris (interview in Hargeisa, 13 November 2008).*



Anab Arab found it hard to articulate her feelings about the unexpected turn of events.

*The men we had worked so hard to support in the SNM became our enemies and our persecutors. It was heartbreaking, and impossible to believe. Bands of armed militiamen began looting. It became unsafe for women to walk outside alone. Women joined hands because we had to, we needed to, promote peace.*

Herself a poet, she recalled marching with other women to the main square in Hargeisa.

*We would sing, recite poems and walk through the city with boards appealing for peace. We also held prayer meetings and sang religious songs. These activities brought people together and empowered the women to be strong, stay steadfast to our purpose and not to get scared. Women from all the corners of Hargeisa asked us to come to their neighborhood and to help them mobilize the women who lived there (interview in Hargeisa, 20 November 2008).*

The elders who took up the mantle include Mohamed Abdi Aden, who currently serves as a member of the Guurti.

*The country achieved and maintained peace because of the network of influence established by the elders. If our traditional leaders had not taken the initiatives they did, and had not devised dynamic and intelligent solutions appropriate to our situation, we would not have the stability we have today. The Guurti realized they had to act fast and make tough decisions for the sake of lasting stability and reconciliation.*

He acknowledged the inter-dependence between the elders and the communities of which they were an integral part.

*The Guurti could not have done anything without the active participation of women and young people. Without their confidence in us as a Guurti, nothing would have been possible. Women played an invaluable role for they agreed to do everything for the family to enable the men to work for peace (interview in Hargeisa, 14 December 2008).*

His colleague, Sheikh Ahmed Sheikh Nuur, described the Guurti as “the fire brigade of Somaliland,” tasked “by the people with resolving disputes, preventing violence and nurturing the conditions for long-term peace.”

*The trust people placed in us facilitated our work. Not only did women take care of all the practical arrangements, such as preparing the food and the venues for the peace conferences, but they were a source of critical moral support (interview in Hargeisa, 13 December 2008).*

Over the next six months, the partnership between the elders and local communities unfolded and was cemented by their efforts, as much as by their successes.

## **B. SHEIKH, OCTOBER 1992**

The extent to which the Guurti had begun to take up the role of administrators in Somaliland became manifest in the meeting they organized in Sheikh in October 1992 in the aftermath of the Berbera conflict. This began on 5 October 1992, when a preliminary peace agreement was signed in Hargeisa between the elders of the Esa Musa

and Habr Yoonis clans. Immediately afterwards, a peace conference was held at Sheikh, a small town between Burao and Berbera, and a formal end to the conflict in Berbera was sealed with a peace agreement between the two warring clans. The success of the meeting, and the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation it generated, was greeted with enormous relief and emboldened the Guurti to plan for a comprehensive national peace conference in early 1993 in Borama, the main town in the Awdal region, home to the Gadabuursi clan. The need for a national meeting arose not only from the necessity to re-examine the future of Somaliland, but also to reconcile the growing differences in the country which had arisen from the disastrous period of turmoil Somaliland had recently experienced.

Given the stalemate, the bitter relations between Abdirahman Tuur and his opponents within the SNM and what was regarded as an abdication of political responsibility by both the government and the SNM, the difficulty was identifying who was best suited to call such a gathering. “Technically”, as Walls, Ali, & Mohammed point out (2008, p. 48), “decisions on the process of transition to civilian rule should have been taken by the SNM Central Committee, who were required to meet twice every year.”

*However, once in power, ‘Tuur’ had shown little interest in convening a meeting, and in any case, he found himself in conflict with many members of the Committee, meaning that the Chair of the Committee, Ibrahim Maigag Samatar, was unable to gain a quorum whenever he did attempt to convene a meeting.*

The solution that Tuur and Samatar came up with had wide-ranging ramifications.

*[They] met with key elders in early November and asked them to take on a mediation role between the government and the opposition. The significance of this change was profound as it marked the moment at which the President and Chair of the Central Committee explicitly offered a mandate to the elders to mediate and to reach a decision on the way forward – effectively handing to an expanded national Guurti the role that had previously been played by the Central Committee. This shift was to play a significant role in the events that were to unfold in the coming months. (Walls, Ali, & Mohammed 2008, p. 48)*

The degree to which the elders were both willing and able to take on this mediation role became clear in Borama at the beginning of 1993.

### **C. THE PINNACLE: THE BORAMA CONFERENCE AND ELECTIONS**

The epic Borama peace conference, which opened in January 1993 and lasted almost four months, must be regarded as one of the single most notable achievements in the history of Somaliland. Its citizens and elders, with virtually no outside assistance, organized and conducted a truly democratic national meeting to come up with a political system they considered appropriate for Somaliland. In many ways it was a merging of traditional democratic laws evolved from generations of pastoral life with the needs of a modern society, which sought to establish a fair government and

determine its own future. The meeting was all the more unusual in that it coincided with the massive and ill-fated foreign military intervention in (southern) Somalia.<sup>3</sup>

Each day's proceedings were chaired on a rotational basis by a different member of the elders who comprised the Guurti. A secretariat was employed to assist the Guurti and to record in detail all that was said. The official participants were the 150 representatives who were drawn proportionally from all groups residing in Somaliland, but throughout the conference, a variety of guests intervened. Observers and press from all over the country witnessed the discussions. On a day-to-day basis, the public discussed a range of issues pertinent to the future of Somaliland. In the afternoons and evenings, many of the most contentious problems were tackled and solved.

The delegates chose Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, who had been prime minister of Somalia in the 1960s, as president, and Abdirahman Aw Ali, an SNM colonel, as vice president. The future stability of Somaliland and the success of the conference depended on a formal and public acceptance of the election result by the interim president, Abdirahman Tuur. The same dogged determination came into play. The meeting was adjourned and, day and night, delegation after delegation of elders, religious leaders and politicians from all clans, including many from his own clan, filed into Abdirahman's house in an effort to persuade him to accept the election result. Many approaches were made and at last, after four days of continuous pressure, Abdirahman Tuur agreed to formally hand over the presidency.

Borama resulted in a National Charter to provide a legal document that stipulated precisely the manner in which Somaliland should be governed and managed over a two-year transitional period. Other results included the establishment of an interim administration, the building of state structures and institutions, the creation of a bicameral parliament consisting of a lower house of parliament and the Council of Elders (Guurti), as well as a peace charter focused on the implementation of peace agreements.

A policy of forgiveness and reconciliation between the clans lay at the heart of the decisions taken in Borama. It was stated in article five of the document that upon the conclusion of the two years, the National Charter 'shall be replaced by a formal constitution for which a referendum will be held.' As far as the Guurti was concerned, it was in Borama that they were transformed into a national political institution.

Borama was the culmination, but not the end, of the peace process. Throughout 1993-1995, there were peace conferences, as well as conflicts, including serious armed clashes in Hargeisa and Burao. What the previous meetings, and Borama, in particular, provided was not only a constructive spirit and a confidence for resolving the most seemingly intractable problems, but a framework for debate and negotiation.

As with any election and transfer of power, there were winners and losers at Borama. The Garhajis, which consist of the Habr Yoonis and the Iidagale clans, were unhappy with the outcome, both in so far as their candidate, Tuur, was not re-elected, and

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<sup>3</sup> For details about the international intervention in Somalia, see Africa Rights (March 1993).

because the vice-presidency went to another candidate. A year and a half after Borama, their dissatisfaction was to present Somaliland with a major military and political challenge.

Despite its impressive achievements, the Borama conference did not usher in an era of political stability. On the contrary, those who perceived Borama as a loss, in particular Tuur and the Habar Yoonis clan to which he belongs, were quick to distance themselves from the new government and to express their opposition by stating their refusal to cooperate with the new administration. The Habar Yoonis made common cause with the Iidagale clan, with whom they form a larger grouping known as Garhajis. Tuur, working alongside some Iidagale politicians, especially Jama Yare, traveled to Mogadishu and, turning their backs on the very idea of secession and Somaliland, gave their backing to a united Somalia and to General Mohamed Farah Aidiid.

## **VI. THE STRUGGLE FOR CONSOLIDATION AFTER BORAMA**

### **A. A TIGER BY THE TAIL: DISARMAMENT AND DEMOBILIZATION**

After establishing peace and the basis of an administration, attention turned to the presence of thousands of armed young men and boys who presented a threat to the basic security of the residents of Somaliland. The overall responsibility for disarmament and demobilization was entrusted to the National Demobilization Commission (NDC) headed by the Vice-President, Abdirahman Aw Ali. There is little doubt that the NDC's assignment was hugely facilitated by strong public antipathy to the very existence of militia forces, which prompted sustained pressure from their families, neighbors, and community elders.

On 11 February 1994, the first mass disarmament rally was held in Hargeisa stadium. Men of the 4<sup>th</sup> brigade and others from the Hargeisa area formally disarmed themselves and handed over their heavy weapons to the President and his government in front of massed cheering crowds. On 27 April 1994, 350 men of the former SNM 5<sup>th</sup> brigade from Gebileh paraded through the streets of Hargeisa and proceeded to hand over their weapons to the President, other senior members of the government and elders gathered before large crowds in the city's stadium. When the war broke out in Hargeisa in November 1994 (see below), it was assumed by many that the demobilization program would be forced to close. But later, as the situation became clearer, the NDC spread out into the regions unaffected by the war to continue their work. A team went ahead with activities in Berbera, Togdheer, Sool and Sanaag whilst another team transferred to Borama and the Awdal region.

Because of their position vis-à-vis the government of Egal, the militia forces of the Garhajis were reluctant to be disarmed by the government. But on 25 August, elders of the Isahaaq clan of the Habr Yoonis announced that from midnight their militia would hand over control of the Hargeisa-Berbera road to the government. This left other sub-clans of the Habr Yoonis and the militia of the Iidagale, whose men had taken charge of

Hargeisa airport and the roads leading to the airport. The significance of the airport became apparent when, in a few months, it was the spark that triggered war in Hargeisa.

## **B. A NEW CURRENCY: A COMING OF AGE FOR SOMALILAND**

There was a strong economic rationale for introducing a new currency: it would be simpler and more efficient and could respond to the increased demand. For the government of Somaliland, there were two other attractions. One was that the new currency would be a symbol of national independence. In addition, by controlling the issuing of the currency, the government would at last have financial strength. The debate on a new currency began in late 1993 and plans were drawn up in early 1994, with introduction scheduled for October.

At a political level, the new money gave the government a fiscal strength it had never previously had. The government of Somaliland was, for the first time, able to pay its civil servants properly and begin implementing some of its policies. Most importantly, it was able to support an army and later pay for the war that erupted in Hargeisa. The new money had immense political ramifications. The opposition groups feared—correctly—that it would give the government a newfound power and they repeatedly denounced the new currency as fraudulent. From 1 February 1995, the government announced that the population should no longer use the former Somali money in their day-to-day transactions. In most towns, Somaliland currency quickly became the norm.

## **C. THE POLITICS OF DESTABILIZATION**

The potential of an independent and stable Somaliland was seen as a threat by a number of key political figures and institutions, and over time they coalesced together in a tactical alliance in 1993-94 aimed at undermining the emergence of a strong and cohesive Somaliland. They included:

- (1) Certain Somaliland politicians, notably former President Abdirahman Tuur and Mohamed Jama Qaalib, known as Jama Yare, who were both bitterly disappointed with the steps taken at Borama, and whose joint clans, the Garhajis, refused to recognize the Egal government as legitimate. These men gained important followings among elements of the Somaliland Diaspora in Nairobi, London, the United Arab Emirates, and elsewhere;
- (2) Somali politicians in Mogadishu with ambitions to re-establish a unitary national state, such as General Mohamed Farah Aidiid;
- (3) Senior figures within the United Nations and leading officials in the United Nations Mission for Somalia, UNOSOM;
- (4) Some governments in the region, notably Egypt, who wanted to maintain the principle of territorial integrity without exception.

After the Borama peace conference concluded its agenda in May 1993, with the election of Somaliland's first non-SNM government, the issue of the future of the SNM was for a time largely forgotten. According to the movement's constitution, an SNM congressional meeting had been due, but since the tumultuous Burao meeting which led to the declaration of sovereignty in May 1991, the SNM congress had never convened again.

It was therefore a great shock to the people and government of Somaliland when, on 29 April 1994, Abdirahman Tuur, in a statement issued in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, publicly condemned the independence of Somaliland using the title "Chairman of the SNM." The press release said that in April, a four-day meeting had been held in Addis Ababa between Aidiid and Tuur, in which Aidiid's SNA and the SNM had come to a common understanding on the need for a federal system in Somalia. Tuur had taken advantage of the fact that the SNM had not called a congressional meeting, the only constitutional means by which the SNM membership could remove him from office, and continued to claim the position of Chairman.

Using this ammunition provided by their leaders, opposition groups abroad played an active role in seeking to win over the outside world, as well as the large expatriate communities of Somalilanders. The result was that those who could afford to return home were dissuaded from doing so, thereby not only hindering the development of Somaliland but also further restricting the outflow of accurate information.

For its part, UNOSOM had always refused to acknowledge even the existence of Somaliland, but because of the severe difficulties and opposition it faced over its operations in the south, they had little time or resources left to tackle Somaliland's secession. This is not to say that on occasions UNOSOM did not try to undermine the sovereignty of Somaliland in order to further its desire for a united Somalia governed by a central administration in Mogadishu.

Although at the time the head of the UNOSOM office in Hargeisa was favorably disposed towards Somaliland, his superiors paid no heed to his calls for assistance to the region and with the exception of a small and erratic contribution to the police force, UNOSOM provided little assistance to Somaliland.

Sool and Sanaag, the most eastern districts of Somaliland, which border Somalia and have large populations that had been aligned with Siad Barre against the SNM, were targets for UNOSOM's activity. There was also a lack of tangible assistance from Hargeisa. Given that the government was both distant and financially weak, UNOSOM, from its offices in the northeastern Somalia port of Bossaso, using the considerable resources available to it, was able to approach communities in these areas without the knowledge or authority of either the government or the UNOSOM office in Hargeisa. Financial and other assistance was promised to the local administrations and businessmen provided they agreed to come under the jurisdiction of UNOSOM's office in Bossaso.

Other failings by UNOSOM included its unwillingness to assist fully with the police forces amidst endless broken promises of equipment and vehicles, its inability to bolster

the demobilization program underway, even though demobilization was listed as a priority on the UN's mandate for Somalia, and the inadequate response UNOSOM made to Somaliland's need for a long-term mine clearance operation. Ultimately it was the issue of UNOSOM's support for the judicial system (part of its mandate) that led directly to its expulsion when it refused to recognize Somaliland's jurisdiction over the east (Sool and Sanaag). On 18 August 1994, the government ordered UNOSOM to close its office in Hargeisa and evacuate its staff. When the Secretary General, Boutros Boutros Ghali, announced the closure of the Hargeisa office to the security council of the UN in New York he mentioned insecurity as a reason.

#### **D. 1994-1995: GRAPPLING WITH YET ANOTHER WAR**

There was barely time to recover from the distress, trauma, and economic dislocation of the 1992 internecine wars, let alone to build upon the achievements and promise of Borama before Somaliland was, once again, plunged into civil conflict. The precipitating issue was the peaceful transfer of the Hargeisa airport from militia control to the hands of the government. By August 1994, the airport had become a critical flashpoint. The government itself was unable to reach an agreement with the leaders of the airport militia and a parliamentary delegation, that included members of the Guurti, failed shortly thereafter.

On 15 October 1994 clan militia from the Iidagale attacked government forces stationed on the Berbera to Hargeisa road. In the afternoon, artillery rounds were fired from positions around the airport into the city of Hargeisa. The following day the army counter-attacked and occupied Hargeisa airport. The situation escalated dramatically a week later when civilians were massacred in front of Gar Gar hotel in central Hargeisa. No one claimed responsibility for the shooting. The incident was broadly interpreted as an attempt to trigger a clan war in Hargeisa between those clans who were pro-government, in particular the Habr Awal, which includes President Egal's Esa Muse clan, and those who opposed it, in the main the Garhajis.

On 14 November, the army captured the militia base at Toon. Almost immediately, full scale war broke out in Hargeisa between government forces and the opposition militia. The population of Hargeisa was not surprised when full scale war broke out in the town and wasted little time in evacuating themselves and their families and possessions to safer ground. For some families, this was the second, third or fourth time they had fled since the war of 1988. At least 90,000 people are thought to have made it to western areas around Gebileh, Arabsiyo and smaller villages, and as far as Borama, and 60,000 more to the eastern and southern areas and over the border to the refugee camps in Ethiopia. Several thousand others moved north to Berbera and various villages on the way.

On 3 December, the government declared a State of Emergency and introduced emergency laws, which included the power to detain any person suspected of being engaged in activities contrary to the welfare and lawful existence of Somaliland. By the end of January 1995, the army successfully mounted an offensive to recapture the airport and surrounding areas and the government's broadening political support and

financial strength were beginning to enable it to assume a new authority in Somaliland. Civil servants received salaries, the police functioned once more and funds, albeit limited, became available for the reconstruction and administration of the country.

The cumulative impact of these developments was to weaken the opposition militarily and politically. The war was taking its toll on civilians in opposition areas. In Mogadishu, backing for the opposition's war in Somaliland was also drying up.

But the war was costly for the government, too. Apart from the financial burden, the continued heavy loss of life on both sides, all of whom were Somalilanders, was politically embarrassing for the government, including vis-a-vis its own people within the country. Conscious of the fact that the troubles would be seen as evidence that Somaliland's secession could not succeed, it was even harder for the government to explain the specter of civil war in Somaliland to outsiders. Extreme elements of the administration favored an end to the conflict solely through military defeat of the opposition. However, others understood that a military victory in itself was not a permanent solution and that a full and lasting peace would only come about if the military pressure was tempered by the offer of reconciliation.

#### **E. BURAO: THE MOST BITTER OF WARS CONTINUES**

On 27 January, 300 troops from the national army were dispatched to Burao as a part of the government's policy of making the army a mixed-clan force. The men were drawn from clans around Hargeisa, Borama, Berbera and the west of the country, none of which traditionally inhabit the Burao area. In exchange the government planned to recruit three hundred men from Burao and the eastern regions.

Burao town itself is roughly divided in two, along clan lines, the Habr Yoonis in the west and the government army and Habr Jelo in the east, with a small number of Esa Musa and Arab. The central area and the livestock market had been regarded as common ground. But in early 1995 after negotiations failed the extreme tension tore apart any idea of mutual co-operation. Throughout February and March no family slept easily, gunfire was often heard at night and small incidents nearly provoked all-out war. War finally broke out on 27 March, when the army attacked opposition militia forces. The Habr Yoonis launched a surprise attack on the eastern districts of the town. Urban warfare comparable to the November-January period in Hargeisa seemed to be in prospect. The entire civilian population fled.

On 15 June, after weeks of sporadic battles, fighting on an unprecedented and fierce scale, lasting for three days, erupted in Burao. By all accounts deaths were high. The opposition retreated to Odweyne and Salahleh, but both towns were later taken by the army and their allies. In response, the Habr Yoonis launched an assault on Hargeisa airport with 300 from the direction of Odweyne, but the airport remained in government hands.

#### **F. THE PROSPECT OF ELECTIONS**



With no end in sight to the conflict between the government and the opposition, the issue of elections loomed large as Egal's term drew to a close in May 1995. The opposition was vehemently opposed to his remaining in office. Those who backed the government, although not necessarily Egal himself as a President, argued that this was not the time for making radical changes to the government, which might further jeopardize the stability of Somaliland and therefore wished to see the President continue his term of office.

The disruption caused by the war had not only made free and democratic elections for the offices of President and Vice-President impossible. The effects of the prolonged political disagreement, which preceded the outbreak of war, and delays in establishing and financing the governmental system in general had also pushed the preparation of a constitution to the side. By the end of April, with the deadline for elections imminent, the Guurti and Parliament were faced with the predicament of steering the country forward without infringing the laws laid down in the National Charter. Much debate followed and the contents of the Charter were carefully scrutinized. Eventually the two houses decided that as a result of the country still being officially under a State of Emergency, the Guurti and Parliament had the right to amend the National Charter. This in turn empowered them to extend the term of office for the government. After much wrangling in parliament, a compromise was reached whereby the President and Vice-President were granted an eighteen-month extension to their period in office.

### **G. 1996-1997 TOWARDS PEACE**

The government seemed incapable of following up its military and political success with a settlement that laid the dispute to rest. By the end of 1995, there was a stalemate. To break the impasse, Somalilanders in the Diaspora formed the Somaliland Peace Committee. Members traveled through the country, including to the refugee camps in Ethiopia, in an attempt to encourage dialogue between the government and its opponents. Although the Committee did not achieve the breakthroughs it had set as its goals, they were a visible and tangible expression of the continued pursuit of peace, at a time when few other forces were energetically engaged in peacemaking. Their intervention also provides an opportunity to look at other players and political dynamics in the resolve to end bloodshed, displacement and hostility in Somaliland.

Beginning in May 1996, a series of intra-clan meetings began to bring the conflicts in Burao to an end. Three conferences, in Gaashaamo in June 1996, in Duruqsi in July 1996 and in Warabeye in July 1996, allowed the Habr Yoonis and the Habr Jelo to iron out their differences. The government's decision to withdraw soldiers from Burao while the talks were underway proved a helpful move. A final peace agreement was concluded in Beer in October 1996, "which established procedures for the disengagement of forces, the safe return of properties to their rightful owners, and mechanisms to prevent future conflicts between the two clans" (Bradbury 2008, pp. 122-123). In June 1996, the Iidagale and other clans from Hargeisa met in Camp Abokor refugee camp in Harshin, Ethiopia.

The wars of 1994-1995 were formally and comprehensively brought to an end with a national conference in Hargeisa between October 1996-February 1997. At the end of the conference, Egal was reinstated as President for five years and Dahir Rayale Kahin became his Vice President. The conference also appointed 164 members to the House of Representatives and Guurti for terms of five and six years respectively, and replaced the National Charter with a provisional constitution introducing multi-party democracy. In addition the government was instructed to proceed immediately with the preparation of the constitution for which a committee of ten men was created. The Constitution, which was put to a vote in a referendum on 31 May 2001, introduced the principle of decentralization and multi-party democracy, giving all eligible citizens the right to vote for a president, a vice-president, the legislature and members of regional and district councils. It also further codified the role of the Guurti (see box).

**Article 61, Constitution of the Republic of Somaliland  
The Powers and Duties of the House of Elders.**

- A. The passing of legislation relating to religion, traditions (culture) and security;
- B. With the exception of financial legislation, the review of legislation approved by the House of Representatives. It may refer back, with written reasons given for its views, any such legislation to the House of Representatives only once within 30 (thirty) days beginning from the date when the relevant legislation was forwarded to the office of the Speaker of the House of Elders;
- C. Advice on the shortcomings of the administration of the Government and the presentation of such advice to the House of Representatives;
- D. Assistance to the Government in matters relating to religion, security, defense, traditions (culture), economy and society, whilst consulting the traditional heads of communities;
- E. Summoning members of the Government and putting questions to them about the exercise of their duties;
- F. The House of Elders shall also have the power to put to the House of Representatives proposals for projects so that the House of Representatives can debate and reach resolutions thereof.

With stability, progress towards a more inclusive form of politics based on a multiplicity of parties, and the singular pursuit of recognition, which necessarily involves an openness to influences from the outside world, the expectation was that the elders' clout would gradually diminish. Although only a handful of women occupy positions in parliament or in the political parties, the mere fact of their presence in these institutions was bound to bring about change and to emphasize the need for further

reforms. Younger men with political aspirations were also impatient to make an impact and a name for themselves. What was not expected, however, was the extent to which the Guurti would savor and protect their newfound power, and how far their interests would enmesh with that of the Executive branch of government.

## VII. THE GUURTI AND THE NEW POLITICAL DISPENSATION

Borama was, without any doubt, the elders' finest hour. This was the moment they should have withdrawn from the political arena in order to retain the authority and moral standing that underpins their capacity to provide an alternative mechanism for dispute resolution. Unfortunately, their extraordinary success in the early 1990s, and the fact that they are now enshrined in the Constitution as an integral part of the political edifice, proved too strong a temptation. Instead of staying above the political fray and confining their role to that of guardians of the Constitution, of peace, security and reconciliation, they have become active as politicians and powerbrokers.

The relations between the Guurti and the government became uncomfortably close under President Egal. At a personal level, Egal understood the elders, for many of them were from his generation. There was a mutual sense of ease that came out of a long shared political history as a common frame of reference. But even more importantly, Egal, a shrewd politician, knew he owed his position to the elders; just as they made him, they could also unseat him. By co-opting them, he sought to curb their independence and effectiveness as a check on the government. They became, in effect, advisors to the government and received material advantages they had never had in their lives, privileges that opened them to accusations of corruption and vulnerability to political interference. In common with several people interviewed for this paper, Amran Ali Hiis, who works in an NGO in Hargeisa, said she first became aware of the new relationship between the government and the Guurti during the 1997 Hargeisa conference.

*It was obvious they were being used by Egal, who had provided some of them with Landcruisers and houses. Previously, they were doing something for the country, but now they wanted something from the country. They saw the government as a source of revenue, and that I think was the beginning of the end (interview in Hargeisa, 12 November 2009).*

A significant milestone in the history of the Guurti was the decision of the overwhelming majority to join UDUB in 2001, the new political party established by Egal. It is estimated that about 70 out of the total number of 82 joined UDUB.

As the testimonies below indicate, these developments took a sharp toll on public perceptions about the integrity, independence and effectiveness of the Guurti, and has drastically altered their relationship with the public. This trend has continued and deepened since 2002, under Egal's successor, President Dahir Rayale Kahin, with the

result that elders have over time become more an adjunct of the government rather than an asset to the community.

The danger to Parliament, the Constitution, the judiciary and to the future of a democratic Somaliland, of this mutual dependence between the Guurti and the Executive, became apparent in 2006 when the mandate of the Guurti was extended by Executive fiat and then ratified by the Guurti itself. Fadal (2009, p. 15) had this to say about the events of 2006.

*When its first term of six years was coming to an end in 2006, the President maneuvered to extend it for another four years without any consultation with the key stakeholders [such] as the House of Representatives and the political parties, who were also trying to work out a consensus solution to the constitutional discrepancy.<sup>4</sup> Even more unexpected was the move the Elders House took immediately afterwards by self-endorsing the extension of their term. The President of the Constitutional Court also pre-empted [the] possibility of stakeholders filing a case by declaring the President's course of action as constitutional. Somaliland [was] ushered overnight into a constitutional crisis instigated by the same institutions that were mandated to uphold the Constitution and to ensure that ... the rule of law is adhered to.*

The degree to which President Rayale has, over the years, relied upon the Guurti in his battles with Parliament and the opposition political parties, including over the various extensions of his presidential term, is the background to this controversy. The violent demonstrations in Hargeisa in September 2009, in which the police shot dead two people after the forcible closure of the House of Representatives, brought the Guurti into the limelight. Demonstrations also occurred in Burao and Las Anod. The protests, which had previously been peaceful, were ignited by allegations that the Guurti was planning to allow the President to remain in office for another year, largely as a way of avoiding an election which had been eagerly awaited and in which considerable effort, time, and resources had already been invested by all concerned, including international donors. The unrest brought Somaliland to the edge of war, as opponents declared their intention to fight the government militarily, and made the necessary preparations, unless the proposed extension was annulled and a firm commitment was made to hold the elections. After a tense stand off, it is widely understood that the President made a final compromise and urged the Guurti to endorse the agreement brokered by the governments of Ethiopia and the UK, which did not call for an extension.

Even before this latest turn of events, many in Somaliland were worried whether the Guurti could be relied upon to scrutinize government policies even if the policies undermine justice and threaten peace. As a result, they no longer command the same respect, enjoy the same legitimacy or wield the same authority in their communities without which they cannot prevent conflicts or bring them to an end.

## **A. THE GUURTI AND THE PUBLIC: A DANGEROUS ALIENATION**

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<sup>4</sup> This is a reference to the fact that the Constitution does not state how members of the Guurti should be re-elected after they have served their term.

Interviews with a cross section of the public reveal a profound disenchantment with the Guurti as they are currently constituted. Criticism is wide ranging and covers a broad spectrum of issues, from the manner in which they are chosen, to their relations with the government and the elected parliament, their effectiveness as representatives of the public and as guardians of peace and security and their ability to find a suitable role in a political system that is radically different from the early 1990s.

Asked how the Guurti had changed since the mid-1990s, almost all interviewees emphasized the fact that a great majority of the elders who had made their political mark in the peace conferences of the 1990s, had since died. Their presence in the Guurti had given it clout and prestige, they said. Many others had become too old and infirm to make much of a contribution to public affairs.

With the death of a significant number of the original Guurti, the question of who replaces them, and how they are chosen, has assumed critical importance. Unfortunately, their sons or other close relatives, irrespective of whether they are suitable candidates, have replaced them or not. Muse Jama Mohamed was an advisor to the Guurti before he became a member of the first National Electoral Commission (NEC). Many members of the Guurti today, he said, lack the qualities associated with elders, adding that some do not even fulfill the minimum age laid down in the Constitution.

*According to the Constitution, a member of the Guurti should not be less than 45 years of age and should be well grounded in cultural and religious affairs.<sup>5</sup> But these conditions are often overlooked now when someone from the Guurti dies and a replacement is sought. Even clans are not given a chance to fill the seat by consensus. Instead, it is the son or another relative who is handpicked by the family (interview in Hargeisa, 11 November 2009).*

As a consultant to the Guurti for four years, Hassan Omar Hoori, who was also briefly a member of the National Electoral Commission, is familiar with the workings of the Guurti. He agrees with Muse's observations.

*The original Guurti consisted of about 82 members, selected by their clan on the basis of their life experience, their wisdom, their standing in their own community, how articulate they were and among other criteria, their powers of persuasion. More than 60 have died, and their positions were taken up by their immediate relatives, without any attention paid to their age and whether, as the Constitution demands, they are people steeped in the culture and religion of Somaliland. Now, there are not more than 20 people in the Guurti who know what is what (interview in Hargeisa, 10 November 2009).*

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<sup>5</sup> According to Article 59 of the Constitution, a candidate for the House of Elders "must not be aged less than 45 years and must be a person who has a good knowledge of religion or an elder who is well-versed in tradition." The opening Article, in the section of the Constitution which deals with the Guurti, talks about Golaha Guurtida, or the House of Elders, but it also talks about Golaha Odayaasha, which literally means the House of Elders. Guurti is a term which is applied to traditional leaders who were invariably elders, but who were not chosen simply because of their age but on account of their personal qualities. As a result, the Constitution specifies that members of the Guurti must be individuals who are well informed about both religion and tradition.

“It is the very essence, and the spirit of what it means to be a member of the Guurti which has changed beyond recognition,” in the words of Zamzam Abdi Aden.

*Because the Guurti was created in response to a war, it was essential to single out the elders who were mostly highly regarded by their clans. You needed people who had the authority and respect to do the job the SNM and the people expected of them. They looked upon their work as a matter of public service. But today, being a member of the Guurti is basically just a job. And because it is seen as one that comes with economic benefits, their relatives are determined to keep the privilege in the family. This sense of entitlement to the position, making it hereditary, has led to the demise of the Guurti. Because they are not motivated by wider social considerations, families are putting forward very young people without any of the requisite qualifications (interview in Hargeisa, 9 November 2009).*

Throughout the 1990s, the Guurti operated in the absence of political parties. Change became inevitable with the introduction of a multi-party system and moves towards a democratic form of governance and the election in September 2005 of an elected House of Representatives, known more commonly as Parliament. Confronted with a new and very different situation, for which they were given no training and which threatened to make them obsolete, the elders responded by becoming more and more indistinguishable from the government.

Although the close relationship the Guurti enjoys with the government might have saved them from political irrelevance, it has all but destroyed public confidence in their impartiality. Muse contrasted the past with the present.

*The original Guurti were not interested in the politics of the day. They were called Danlawe, which suggests that the person does not have a vested interest in the task he is doing. When the Guurti was set up, they were not elected and they did not belong to any political party. But in 2001, they joined the ruling UDUB party, which greatly dented their claims to neutrality in the political arena.*

*The public thinks poorly of the Guurti today because they see them as increasingly concerned with fulfilling the wishes of the Executive branch of the government. The fact that they extended their own mandate in May 2006 without the approval of the House of Representatives, and their constant eagerness to give the President more time in office, has further diminished the esteem in which the public holds the Guurti. They are seen, more and more, as a rubber stamp for the government (interview in Hargeisa, 11 November 2009).*

Hoori went further and described the renewal of their mandate in 2006 as “an illegal and unconstitutional act of self-perpetuation.” (interview in Hargeisa, 10 November 2009)

Amran Ali Hiis wonders how Parliament can serve the people of Somaliland when the Guurti consistently refuses to pass their legislation especially, she added, “if it is legislation they believe will harm the President.” (interview in Hargeisa, 12 November 2009)

The politicization of the Guurti has encouraged certain members to nurse political ambitions, added Muse, a tendency that has been accentuated by the inclusion of ever-younger members.

Hodan Saeed Diriye recently graduated in law from the University of Hargeisa where she said the Guurti have become a byword for imposing one's viewpoint on others or for failing to reach a conclusion.

*Whenever an argument became protracted during student debates, people would say: "Do we want to argue like the Guurti or like ordinary people?" Or when a student showed an intolerance to listen to others, they would say: "This is not the Guurti but a classroom where we have discussions." This shows that young people see the Guurti as a source of endless and pointless arguments, or a place where the give and take of discussion is discouraged, and more generally as a problem for Somaliland (interview in Hargeisa, 11 November 2009).*

Inevitably, young people like Hodan are particularly impatient with the power of the Guurti.

*Older people, whom the Guurti represents, don't have confidence in the new political system. They think Somaliland can only be safe so long as elders are in charge. But young people believe much more in democracy and multi-partyism. We have more faith in parliamentarians than in the Guurti. Whenever young people discuss politics, there is one thing about which everyone is always in agreement: we do not want a Guurti in which positions are hereditary.*

*We are aware that in the past elders did a lot for Somaliland. But those who knew how the country was destroyed and how it was saved have died for the most part. And in their place we have some relative who has no sense of history, is inexperienced, and may not even have any other qualifications. If we must continue with the Guurti, then at a minimum they must be elected and judged on the basis of their individual background and achievements (interview in Hargeisa, 11 November 2009).*

Salah Ahmed Shirre, in his second year of computer science at Hargeisa University, feels that much more should have been done to prepare the Guurti for the advent of multi-partyism.

*The Guurti were most effective when there were no political parties and no attempt had been made to inch towards a more democratic structure. I think they regard the new system as an imposition. Their ignorance about democracy is a huge stumbling block for Somaliland, especially when many of the newer members lack the gravitas of the elders who held Somaliland together in the early days. In fact many are lightweights. They are "elders" only in name. Besides, I think it's not right to have parliamentarians who are elected and elders who are not. It's a recipe for conflict and confuses the public (interview in Hargeisa, 12 November 2009).*

He explained why young people feel a greater affinity with parliamentarians.

*The Guurti and the youth don't know anything about each other. We are closer to the House of Representatives. They are more educated and so understand the value of education, which is important to us. Many of them are professionals in their own right, and quite a few lived abroad, so they are more aware of what is happening in the world. Although they are not very good at keeping in touch with their constituents, they are much more accessible than the Guurti and they have*

more ideas and information about what we see as our priorities (interview in Hargeisa, 12 November 2009).

Khalid Mohamoud Hirsi, 25, graduated in 2008 from Hargeisa University in business administration. He spoke of “a big gap” between young people and the Guurti.

*We hardly have any contact with them because they don't come to places where the youth are represented. They never speak about our concerns, especially unemployment which is a trap for so many young people. They should be pressing the government to create employment opportunities for young people, but they don't. I don't see them pushing the government on anything because they have merged with the government. At least with parliamentarians, they are more in touch with what we think and we find it easier to submit our complaints to them. In any case, I see the Guurti as less and less significant politically. It was the intervention of foreign countries which saved the day in September; this shows you how much their influence has diminished (interview in Hargeisa, 12 November 2009).*

Isahaq Mohamoud Mohamed, 24, is in his third year of economics and politics at Hargeisa University. From what he heard of the original Guurti, he expected their successors to be “people known for their mastery of tradition, culture and religion.”

*The truth is that a lot of the younger Guurti have no particular knowledge of any of these areas. It is not only the young who despair of the Guurti. Most people I know just see them as an extension of the government. If they were thinking about the future, they should be thinking about education and job creation. They are always talking about conflict resolution. But even that they don't do very well because they're so entangled with the government (interview in Hargeisa, 12 November 2009).*

The Guurti have alienated Somalilanders across the spectrum, male and female, from the young to the old, from the poor to the more affluent, from those with little education to the highly educated. Khadija, in her seventies, still feels indebted to the elders for rising to the occasion when the people of Somaliland were on their knees, but argued that the current Guurti have forfeited the trust of the public.

*Elders used to be considered the leaders of their families and communities and were in charge of conflict within and between communities. They distinguished themselves during the war and years of exile when they took on the responsibility of recruiting fighters and mobilizing resources for the SNM. And they came to the rescue of Somaliland when, immediately after returning to the country, people were unsettled. They acted like leaders, talking to people, correcting wrongs and trying to reign in troublemakers. Ironically, they lost their way when the country became more stable and there was a functioning government. They changed because they themselves became part of the government by having their own little parliament, which gave them an elevated position and economic benefits. Of course there are honest members of the Guurti who think about the needs of ordinary people. But too many of them just blindly follow the government and want to impose the government's will on the public (interview in Hargeisa, 8 November 2009).*



Khadija, like many others, blames the Guurti for bringing Somaliland to the brink of war in mid-September 2009, and is grateful that they reversed their decision in time.

*The public reacted with fury after the Guurti seemed to be siding with the government's plans to derail the elections by allowing the President to scrap the elections and remain in office for another year. We came within an inch of a major conflict. It was the Guurti's own Chairman who reminded them that they held the fate of Somaliland in their hands, and who told them publicly that there would be bloodshed if they did not listen to their people and facilitate the elections. He showed the kind of decisive leadership that people had previously expected of the Guurti as a whole, but which they have not shown of late. Although I have been disappointed in their behavior many times in recent years, still I appreciate the fact that they grasped the seriousness of the situation in time and unanimously agreed to back off from the plan to give the President an extension (interview in Hargeisa, 8 November 2009).*

Abdirashid, a young man in his early thirties, insisted that it was “the violent demonstrations and the threats against them personally which forced the Guurti to backtrack at the last minute.”

*They had already given the President three extensions, and thought nothing of giving him the fourth one. The only reason that they did not do so is the fear they felt in the face of the massive public outcry (interview in Hargeisa, 8 November 2009).*

The Guurti, he added, is now so focused on protecting their own interests and that of the President that they have lost sight of the citizens of Somaliland.

*The Guurti no longer define their role in relationship to the public. Their sole point of reference is the government. They are now politicians and so have lost their neutrality; they are no longer community leaders in touch with the needs and views of the people who should be their natural constituencies, that is us, the man and woman in the street. I would say that more than 60 percent are faithful to whatever the government wants. And you see this especially whenever there is talk of elections. They disregard what the Constitution says and vote instead to give the President more and more years in office. And they do this because he allowed them to prolong their own term, so they are looking out for each other. Neither the Guurti nor the President want elections. But where's the interest and role of the ordinary citizen in all this? Nowhere. They agreed to drop talk of a fourth extension for the President out of fear, such was the scale and intensity of public anger and political tension. They were afraid of what might happen to them personally if they went against public opinion (interview in Hargeisa, 8 November 2009).*

Given the existence of opposition parties and the reality that the *Guurti* is now a political entity, inevitably some individuals are consistently, or on occasion, identified with the opposition. But the *Guurti*, as an institution, is widely regarded as solidly pro-government.

Saeed Ahmed Mohamoud of Interpeace, which has been involved with parliamentary and presidential elections in Somaliland, spoke of “a growing dissatisfaction” towards the government within the *Guurti*, pointing to the fact that as many as 35 voted in

March 2009 against a motion to extend the term of the President, which passed with 42 votes in favor. But he remains convinced that the Guurti will remain a tool of the Executive.

*There is ground swell of opinion that the government, to further its political aims, will always get enough votes from the Guurti (interview in Hargeisa, 10 November 2009).*

Despite the evidence of divisions within the Guurti, with some members showing loyalty to the opposition, Hoori underlined a number of factors that he summed up as “troubling.”

*Whether they vote with or against the government, they are acting in a political capacity, and that is in itself dangerous. Where, in all this, is their duty to the public? There never seems to be time to examine the needs of ordinary people in the midst of negotiations which are overtly political and which are fundamentally about their personal or institutional interests. What matters the most for them is financial gain, not what is good for the man and woman in the street. They have completely abdicated their responsibility to work for the public of Somaliland (interview in Hargeisa, 10 November 2009).*

Like Hoori, Hassan Hashi Urdoh, a businessman, pointed out that the Guurti is also susceptible to the influence of opposition parties.

*Political parties are very involved with their business. In fact, any party which has political interests can sway them (interview in Hargeisa, 13 November 2009).*

The strong relationship with the government has cemented the belief that the Guurti is driven, above all, by the material benefits they derive from being an ally of the Executive branch. Halimo, an elderly woman who did not want her full name used, is adamant that the Guurti “is far too influenced by the money the government gives them.”

*Traditionally, elders were seen as representatives of their communities who did not take sides politically. But now I see the majority of the members of the Guurti as politicians, first and foremost. They make me angry and make most people I know angry. Otherwise, how do you explain the fact that they rarely debate serious issues that affect everyone’s welfare. Instead, they just insist that we all follow what they call the right path and the right path is invariably what the President wants (interview in Hargeisa, 8 November 2009).*

At the age of 24, Hodan is too young to remember the activities and achievements of the elders in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She does, however, have enough first-hand experience of the Guurti of today to have drawn her own conclusions.

*At university, their own children talked openly about how useful it was to have fathers in the Guurti, and how their money troubles eased whenever there was a political impasse.*

*Some of the Guurti don’t know their rights and believe that the government can dismiss them, which makes them even more vulnerable to pressure. They don’t see themselves as independent, with powers to correct the mistakes of the government or to take action against the government (interview in Hargeisa, 10 November 2009).*

The chasm between the Guurti and the public, which is now all too apparent, raises doubts about how effective the elders can be if Somaliland were to experience serious conflict in the near future. “Their role will be minimal,” commented Muse.

The recent conflict in Eel Berdale [in western Somaliland] demonstrates the impotence of the Guurti in brokering peace between clans (interview in Hargeisa, 11 November 2009).

The public expects the Guurti to be proactive on security matters. On the contrary, said Hodan, “they use insecurity to maximize their visibility and to encourage the government to reward them more generously.”

*They should be the ones taking pre-emptive action against everything that could jeopardize peace. They should not let the situation deteriorate until everyone is afraid. But they do. They wait for things to reach the point of danger so they can be courted here and there and for the money to flow. This is the complete opposite of the responsibility the public wants them to exercise (interview in Hargeisa, 10 November 2009).*

Speaking of the clashes in September 2009, she asked a pertinent question.

*Why did they wait until people got shot, until there were riots and until the police closed Parliament by force? They did not act until the very last minute when they realized just how explosive the situation had become. And even then, I don't think many of them actually listened to what people were saying. I think they just became worried for themselves because if the country collapses, they too would be losers (interview in Hargeisa, 10 November 2009).*

Saying the Guurti “got entangled in politics and lost its way,” Ahmed Nuur, a teacher, agreed that they would no longer be able, on their own, to ward off conflict or bring about a peaceful resolution.

*In the 1990s, the elders saw working for peace and social harmony as a responsibility that came with the territory of being an elder. They did not wait to be asked to take the lead; being a leader was what defined them. And they could do this because they knew the people trusted them instinctively and implicitly. But now they can't put out the fires of conflict by themselves precisely because they have broken their part of the contract with the public by not acting as independent leaders, but rather as politicians who take sides, in the process losing their honesty and standing. For them to act now, they need to be pushed by the public and civic groups. And they can only be effective if they act in concert with the public, religious and civic leaders. Gone are the days when they led and the public was prepared to follow them.*

*And it is hard for them to be leaders when the Guurti itself is not united around a clear agenda of its own and when so many of them are too involved in politics and making money (interview in Hargeisa, 8 November 2009).*

In the absence of a strong Guurti both willing and able to preempt and mediate conflict, and to promote security and good governance, the existence or non-existence of other institutions the public can look to for leadership has come to the forefront of political debate in Somaliland. No single entity appears to be regarded as an organized

institution that is united and strong enough to take the place of the Guurti. In the context of the clashes of September 2009, and in the immediate aftermath, people are for the most part relieved that initiatives by groups and individuals acting on an ad hoc basis contained the situation. But with regard to the long-term, there was a palpable sense of apprehension.

Muse paid tribute to civil society for their role in minimizing the fallout from the clashes in September.

*Members of various civic groups were active in the search for solutions. Some people who had worked with the former Electoral Monitoring Board, some journalists and prominent members of the public voluntarily organized themselves so that Somaliland could overcome the political impasse (interview in Hargeisa, 11 November 2009).*

Saying “the salvation of Somaliland no longer lies with the Guurti who have compromised their independence and integrity,” Abdirashid called on others to remain alert and attentive.

*If the public, civic organizations and the National Electoral Commission (NEC) work together, this could be the key to the future stability of Somaliland. But of course the NEC must be left alone by the government to do what it was set up to do (interview in Hargeisa, 8 November 2009).*

Hoori acknowledges that others, including elders who are not members of the Guurti, the media, intellectuals and businessmen helped to defuse the situation in September. He does not, however, see another institution that can fulfill the tasks entrusted to the Guurti by the Constitution.

*The most obvious alternative would be religious leaders. But because they are themselves divided, and often at loggerheads in their public arguments, they can only act in an individual capacity and so lack institutional weight.*

*Nor does the public speak with one voice. What worries me the most is that there has been no sustained public discussion of what brought us to the abyss in September. The crisis was averted and now it's business as usual. Who and what are we waiting for, because nothing has been definitively resolved? Do we think that intervention by the international community, which only comes with a piece of paper calling for a short-term agreement, will be sufficient? Personally, I am very uneasy about the future (interview in Hargeisa, 10 November 2009).*

Hodan was reluctant to recommend either Parliament or religious figures as a potential new centre of leadership, saying they lacked unity of purpose. She placed her hopes in the public as guardians of their own future.

*The public must act as a critical mass whenever there is a real threat to peace in Somaliland (interview in Hargeisa, 10 November 2009).*

But Zamzam believes that it is both unfair and unrealistic to impose such a heavy burden on the public.

*I don't think it is reasonable to expect a public, as impoverished as that of Somaliland, to be politically engaged on a permanent basis. It is not sustainable.*

*Small-scale traders and people surviving on the economic edge simply cannot afford to go on protests often (interview in Hargeisa, 9 November 2009).*

Poverty, she added, also makes the public itself vulnerable to other pressures that weaken their capacity to act in concert over a long period.

*Poverty is a major reason why it's so easy to buy people. And poverty and weak government institutions, including the Guurti, also explain why the clan becomes so strong. Who else are people to rely on when they are in need? And when the clan becomes very strong, you are bound to have divisions and conflicts of interest.*

*No one goes to the Guurti to complain about injustice. People sometimes go to the political parties, but it's more to expose the problem than any hope that they can do something about it.*

*To avoid war, we must continuously push the political parties to do what they can and we must always keep the channels open for dialogue. But it would not be right or wise to lay the responsibility on the public.*

Echoing the views of others that prominent religious personalities are too wary of each other to offer a united front, she said Parliament is undermined by the fact that most of the legislation they have passed has been blocked by the Guurti.

*All they can do is to ensure that they are not defeated altogether and to be vigilant against a slide towards war. As for the Saladiin [traditional clan elders], there has been such an inflation as the government encourages every clan to appoint more than they are not, as a group, regarded as serious contenders for leadership positions.*

Saying “their number is increasing by the day and they are fractious in their approach to politics,” Muse agrees that the Saladiin cannot usurp the role of the Guurti.

Hassan Hashi Urdoh was not optimistic either.

*There are groups organized on a clan basis, but there is no suitable institution which represents all clans (interview in Hargeisa, 13 November 2009).*

Because he says it would take “too long to build up another institution,” Salah expressed the hope that an elected Guurti, consisting of educated people with an interest in promoting democratic practices, could take Somaliland forward to a more stable future.

Despite the evidence that the Guurti is no longer a true reflection of what it used to be, the weight of history, tradition and culture, the shortcomings of the political system in the early 1990s and memories of those turbulent years when elders played to their strengths and helped to bring Somaliland back from the brink of political abyss, gave them, and in turn the Guurti, a unique platform from which to shape events. The central role that elders continue to play in politics, formally within the Guurti and more broadly and informally within the society, is both a cause and a consequence of how far considerations of clan continue to dominate the political scene, including in the new political parties. This is inevitable. The extreme poverty, which defines the lives of most of the people, and a difficult physical environment, are the backdrop to a harsh economic reality that limits opportunities and political options. In a society where the majority of people are poor, where unemployment is rampant, and the government

does not have the capacity to offer jobs, let alone pensions, health insurance and other forms of welfare, and where the judiciary does not provide adequate recourse, people have no choice but to depend on family ties and solidarity within the clan for financial sustenance, for protection and as their only shield against the vicissitudes of fortune. Until and unless representative and strong political structures responsive to the everyday needs of people exist, alongside a political culture that seeks to bring people together because of the values and interests they have in common, clan loyalty, and along with it, the power of elders, will remain central to Somaliland.

## VIII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: A BRAVE NEW EXPERIMENT, BUT WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The achievements of Somaliland to date, given its history, the strength of the forces opposed to its existence, the lack of international recognition and financial assistance, are impressive in themselves by any yardstick. But as the discussion above illustrates, it faces an array of internal challenges that it must address, urgently and in a serious and sustained manner, in order to safeguard its hard won victories.

It would be naïve to expect a western style democracy to take root in a few years in Somaliland. As in many other developing countries, personalities, political parties built around the interests of individuals or clans, rather than robust public institutions, are the key features of the political infrastructure. And yet it was the absence of strong institutions to curb the excesses of the Siad Barre regime, and to defend individual and collective rights, which fueled the war and prompted years of exile, which in turn eventually led to the birth of Somaliland.

Political fragility comes largely from the weakness of institutions, ranging from the Executive branch of government, the Guurti, Parliament, the opposition parties, the judiciary, the National Electoral Commission, various governmental bodies as well as civil society. Lack of experience and of the necessary human and financial resources are certainly major contributing factors. But the absence of a strong political will focused on institution building has also acted as a brake. The democratic promise of decentralization has yet to translate into a meaningful transfer of power from the centre to the regions to ensure that people have effective control of the decisions that govern their lives on a day- to-day basis.

In describing the approach taken by the Executive branch to the prospect of democratization, Fadal (2009, p. 16) made the following commentary.

*[T]he Government's efforts can only be characterized as non-committal, if not hostile towards the process, especially when ... the constrained relationship it has with all [the] forces that are expected to be supporters and vehicles of democratization such as the media, civil society, and the opposition political parties [is taken into consideration]. Considering the way it spends effort and resources to weaken the parliamentary process, and how selective it is [with regard*

*to] the implementation and enforcement of laws and legislations passed by the Parliament, the government's commitment to institutionalize democracy and the rule of law raises serious doubts.*

Parliament has had to cope with a series of internal deficiencies, stemming in large part from inadequate resources, but has also seen its relevance to the concerns of ordinary people subsumed by a political war of attrition between the opposition and the government. The ruling party and the two opposition parties are spending too much of their time bickering amongst themselves, or with each other, rather than in harnessing the energy of their constituencies to more constructive ends, and in developing parties along more professional lines. Of particular concern is the widespread perception of the judiciary, which in any case is largely confined to urban towns, as incompetent, corrupt and politically subservient to the government. The dissatisfaction with the courts has encouraged people to turn instead to the elders and the Islamic Sharia for resolution of legal disputes in personal as well as large-scale commercial cases.

In addition to the pressures from within, Somaliland will undoubtedly confront, in the near future, threats to its existence and its stability, which will, once again, test its people and its institutions to the limits. The rivalry with Puntland over the disputed regions of Sool and Sanaag, to which both Somaliland and Puntland lay claim, has already led to armed clashes on several occasions. But it is anxiety about developments in Somalia, and more specifically the prospect of a Somalia under the hard-line rule of the "Islamic purists" of Al-Shabaab that has rattled nerves.

The Islamic forces which have spent years battling for control of Somalia have never made a secret of their intentions to force Somaliland back into the political fold. On the morning of 29 October 2008, the first suicide bombings in Hargeisa killed over two dozen people and wounded many more when three trucks, in a well coordinated movement, rammed into the walls of the presidency, the offices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the offices of the trade representative of Ethiopia. The attacks were seen as the work of Al-Shabaab. They renewed their threats against Somaliland after the government and the opposition parties signed an agreement, mediated by the UK and Ethiopia, which brought the violence to an end in September 2009. They were critical of the involvement of Ethiopia and the UK. The irony was not lost on the people of Somaliland: foreign countries and the Somaliland Diaspora were more actively engaged in the search for peace, while the Guurti, which had made a name for itself because of its commitment to peace, was blamed for being a factor in the crisis.

## **IX. LEARNING FROM SOMALILAND: WHAT ARE THE LESSONS?**

The question inevitably arises as to why Somaliland was able to make the peace that has eluded Somalia. It would be misleading to draw up a blueprint, even as it relates to Somali-speaking territories. There are, nevertheless, salient features of Somaliland's

experiences that are worth bearing in mind as the world grapples, once again, with the enigma that is Somalia.

The absence of foreign interference was perhaps the greatest blessing for it meant there was no external agenda in terms of the content, pace or outcome of the talks. Preoccupied by the US/UN intervention in Somalia in late 1992-1993, which had gone disastrously wrong in a very public manner, the world left Somaliland alone, which after all had no strategic significance in the aftermath of the Cold War. Conferences on Somalia have been dominated by a plethora of foreign actors, with conflicting interests, who jockeyed for influence in the discussions about the way forward. As Somalia became increasingly engulfed in violence, the move in favor of secession insulated Somaliland and enabled its people to define their own needs and come up with appropriate strategies and solutions.

The search for peace as a matter of survival, and not in response to external intervention, and the spirit of self-reliance, were determining factors. Other important characteristics were the use of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms familiar to all the concerned parties and the profound trust placed in the elders as mediators, which enhanced the chances that their recommendations and sanctions would be accepted. The adoption of a slow and lengthy process, in which talks often lasted for months, was a deliberate tactic designed to give the parties time to listen, to be heard, to unburden themselves, to air their grievances and to work together to reach an agreement. The long negotiations, during which the warring parties sat, talked, ate and prayed together were meant to provide opportunities to discuss shared interests and common points of history, in order to build bridges and facilitate trust. The cultural shame, for both the individual and the clan, associated with a refusal to abide by the decisions of elders, combined with religious entreaties and the fear of a collective curse, were powerful incentives to work towards reconciliation.

A comparative analysis of the Somalia/Somaliland peace conferences would be a rich study in contrasts. Djibouti and Kenya, countries with a direct vested interest in the future political map of Somalia, have featured prominently as the venues for Somali peace talks, usually under the auspices of the UN, with delegates from many foreign countries and institutions. Funded by the UN and other sources, and sometimes distracted by unseemly disagreements over financial perks, it is difficult to avoid the impression of a profound disconnect from the concerns and perspectives of the people in whose name peace was being waged. Control of the purse strings gives donors undue powers; conversely, it absolves the protagonists of accountability to their own people.

In Somaliland, by contrast, talks took place “at home,” and were almost entirely financed by local communities, and by Somalilanders in the Diaspora, ranging from cash payments to the provision of food, drinks, transport, accommodation, and general hospitality. Not only was use of the money transparent, but it was also understood that resources and hospitality were finite, which helped to keep the proceedings on track. Because the discussions were held in towns accessible to many people, news about progress and setbacks traveled fast and far, easing the flow of information and making it



possible for a broad spectrum of people to keep abreast of developments and to make an input.

While the leadership, unity, and perseverance of the elders were both the catalyst and the channel for bringing an end to the bloodshed, the success is due entirely to the will of ordinary people to live a life free of strife. Somaliland's peace process in the 1990s was a multi-faceted and broad based process. Many players, from different backgrounds, made a contribution. The campaign for peace and reconciliation was community driven and this is widely regarded as the key to its legitimacy, credibility, and success. Even though the dissolution of the SNM as an organized movement was part of the problem, the absence of other armed movements in competition with the SNM was a critical asset. This advantage is highlighted by the extent to which peace has remained elusive in Somalia in large part because of the continuous clashes between many armed groups, each with its arsenal of weapons and sponsors.

While Somaliland's past holds important lessons about confronting conflict and overcoming it, it is just as important to reflect upon the difficulties it currently faces. It is tempting to draw simplistic conclusions from the analysis above and to blame the elders for allowing some of their achievements to unravel and for failing to provide Somaliland with the leadership it requires. While true that the Guurti specifically has let the people of Somaliland down and has contributed to the problems they must now confront, it would be wrong, and misleading, to focus on what might appear to be a convenient explanation. The record of the politicians and governments that have been at the helm since the mid-1990s, as well as that of civic organizations and traditional and religious leaders, must also be examined. Just as ending conflict in Somaliland required the engagement of all sectors of society, the lessons of the past fifteen years is that nurturing peace, building institutions, exercising the duties of citizenship, enhancing the prospects for democracy, encouraging a sense of belonging, and creating the confidence to face the future requires constant vigilance and is the responsibility of each and every citizen.

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